

The main cover illustration features a central character, a young man with short, light grey hair and green eyes, wearing a black jacket with a green tie and a black skirt. He is in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. Behind him to the left are two other characters: a girl with long, light grey hair and a purple bow, and a boy with dark blue hair. To the right is a girl with long brown hair in a black and white dress. The background shows a village with a thatched roof and a body of water under a blue sky with yellow petals falling.

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE

by the
Optimistic Lord

~PRODUCTION MAGIC Turns a Nameless Village
into the STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY~

Written by
SOU AKAIKE

Illustrated by
KURURI

NOVEL

1



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Till

Van's personal maid. She's a bit clumsy, and she dotes on Van like crazy.

Van Nei Fertio

Reincarnated as the fourth son of a marquis. Born with production magic, he was exiled to a village in the sticks.

Khamsin

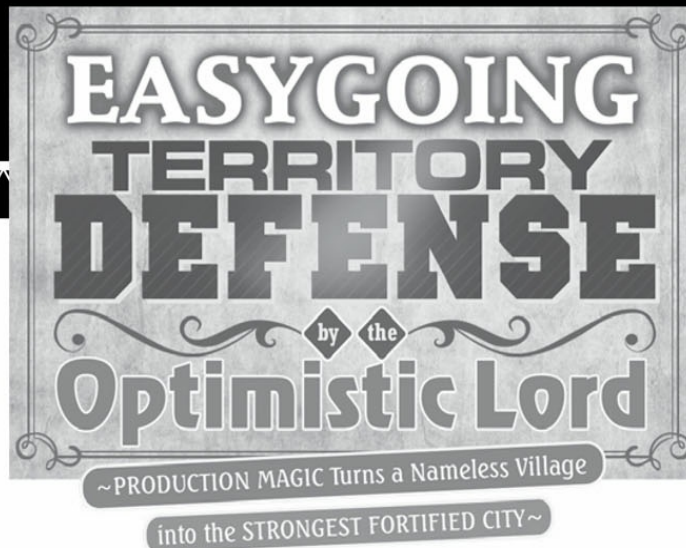
Van bought him before he was sold into slavery. He worries about Van.



I squinted into the distance, trying to get a better look. Trees were ripped out at the roots as a great beast tore through the forest. The dragon appeared before us, flapping its massive wings.

Dee

Esparda



NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY

Sou Akaike

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kururi



Seven Seas Entertainment

EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD:
PRODUCTION MAGIC TURNS A NAMELESS VILLAGE INTO THE
STRONGEST FORTIFIED CITY (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 1

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent

to press@gomanga.com.

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TRANSLATION: Elliot Ryouga

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

LOGO DESIGN: Mariz Eloisa Hechanova

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm

PROOFREADER: Evan Scherer

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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EASYGOING TERRITORY DEFENSE
BY THE OPTIMISTIC LORD



Prologue:

Failure of a Fourth Son

“HE HAS NO APTITUDE FOR ANY OF THE FOUR elemental magics? How could such a failure of a child come from our house? The house of a marquis?!”

There you have it—my father’s scathing words.

Citizens in our country had their magical aptitude appraised at the age of eight. In this world filled with magic, it was important to know what innate talents people possessed. Why assess that as late as eight years old? In the past, children without any real control over their powers were evaluated too early, their magic running wild and unleashing a string of tragedies.

For the record, two types of magic were highly sought after by the nobility: any of the four elemental magics specialized for offense and defense—and thereby the protection of one’s home and people—and healing magic.

On the flip side, there were types of magic the nobles deemed lesser. Thieving magic that enabled one to absorb stamina, sap magic power, and steal possessions from others. Transformation magic. Illusion magic used to create hallucinations or brainwash the target. Appraisal magic that laid bare all manner of details

about people and things. Marionette magic. Necromancy. All kinds of different magics existed.

And so it was judged that the production magic I possessed was beneath nobility.

As the name implied, production magic gave its user the power to create things. It was also referred to as alchemy. Generally speaking, creating things required a great deal of magic power, and the things one could make weren’t exactly impressive. Most mages with this talent used iron or copper to forge the swords and accessories of their imaginations.

Others became true inventors, but they were few and far between. Magic just

wasn't required to invent things, and production magic even less so. The same went for smithing, making those magical blacksmiths obsolete. Thus, production mages were considered to be the most unfortunate of them all.

Magical aptitude was heavily dependent on genes. If one's parents had magical aptitude for one of the four elements, there was more than a 50 percent chance their child would share it. Additionally, if one's grandparents also had that magical aptitude, there was an over 70 percent chance of inheriting it. As such, the nobility had long sought out those with elemental aptitude as partners, and that became part of the culture. If everyone in the family possessed said talents, it was almost guaranteed that the next child would inherit those abilities.

As time went by, this custom tightened its chokehold. If any other aptitude (outside of healing magic) manifested in a child of nobility, they were deemed an embarrassment. That warped mindset didn't spread particularly far among smaller nobles, or quasi-noble families like warrior households. But when it came to the houses of counts and marquises—such as my own—this tradition was doctrine.

"Ours is a family of fighters. It was through my military feats that I clawed my way up from count to marquis, elevating the household along with it. To enhance my already potent flame magic through future heirs, I married the flame mage Mira—even though she was from a barony, mind you. She was a good wife and mother, but her body was as weak as her magic was strong. As the fourth son, you were last in line to shoulder the family name," my father, Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio, said with a disgusted look on his face.

My mother, Mira, passed away when I was just five. My father took a second and third wife, but oddly enough, Mother was the only one to have boys. Thus, Father was deeply despondent when she died. We four boys were educated very strictly, and it only got worse.

My eldest brother, Murcia, inherited wind magic from our maternal grandmother. Yet the second-and third-eldest inherited flame magic, just as Father hoped.

From the age of thirteen, Murcia was educated as the acting leader of the

family, but it wasn't long before my other brothers banded against him in mockery. Murcia knew they were Father's favorites, so he strove to work harder than anyone else. He sacrificed sleep so he could become a great noble in matters other than magic.

Thanks to his efforts, Murcia never lost his position as acting leader of the family. My other brothers didn't take this well, attributing his position to a difference in age rather than ability, so they continued to sling insults his way. I, on the other hand, had just turned eight and was about to have my magical aptitude appraised. I'd been told that I was special ever since I was little, so my father had high expectations of me.

However, the result of the appraisal was that I had production magic—the worst possible outcome. While my father was utterly dejected by the news, my two cruel older brothers smirked with glee. They'd been wary of my assessment till then. Murcia, on the other hand, sympathized with my plight.

“Our house is bound to grow in the future, yet we produced offspring with production magic? This is no laughing matter. Perhaps it would be best if I just —”

Before Father could finish his disturbing thought, Murcia cut in with a smile.

“Ah, right! Wasn't there that one village on the frontier, Father? It is technically part of our territory, but its poor location has stunted development. What say we leave it to Van?”

“That nameless village? Why?” Father shot him a doubtful look, but the smiling Murcia bobbed his head eagerly.

“The Kingdom of Yelenetta is next door, correct? And then the other side is Lord Ferdinatto's territory. There's also a defensive location—the fortress city—though it's rather far away. The village really only has value as a campground for the knights when they go to Ferdinatto County for expedition training.”

“I'm well aware. There have only ever been a hundred or so villagers at any given time, and they produce nothing of note. The Wolfsbrook Mountain Range to the north has natural resources, but powerful monsters lurk betwixt the crags. It's part of the land I acquired upon becoming a marquis, yet Lord Ferdinatto often deploys his knights there to punish me for 'stealing' it.”

No sooner had Father said that than his head snapped up.

“Oh, I get it now. In other words, if we send Van to that village, we can station our own knights nearby without it being an issue! Not to mention, since that area is newly acquired territory, the villagers are not truly loyal to our house. If we dispatched one of our own there, even a screw-up like Van... Yes, I see. Well thought, Murcia. You’ve found a way to use the useless.”

In response to those awful words, Murcia bowed his head deeply.

Thus, I was ordered to become the lord of the nameless village in the middle of nowhere. Father left the room in a great mood, his favorites trotting behind him, leaving only myself and Murcia behind.

“Brother...”

When I called for him, his winning smile wilted with sorrow. He came up to me and dipped his head in apology. *My own brother*, ten years older than me.

“I am so sorry. I know that even without magical aptitude, you are a wise, talented member of the nobility. That’s why I made such an outlandish request of Father. If you resent anyone, let it be me.”

I grimaced at his awkward attempt at an explanation and shook my head. “Absolutely not. You saved my skin just now! If things had gone on any longer, Father might’ve had me locked up or even killed. Perhaps he’d cut out my tongue and sell me on the slave market! This situation may seem hopeless, but I have no intention of wasting the opportunity you’ve given me.”

Murcia raised his head and looked at me, wide-eyed. “You truly are a genius. I get the feeling that our dear marquis will regret sending you to the middle of nowhere.” A flicker of anguish crossed his face, and then he addressed me seriously. “I might not be able to do much, but I will do whatever I can. Anything to help you, Van.”

“Thank you,” I replied, beaming.

Though things were still awkward, Murcia’s lips quirked up. “You have always been such a mysterious child, sensitive to the subtleties of the human heart. You appear to be a deeper thinker than I’ve ever been.” His smile grew, a faraway look in his eyes. “Esparda and Till, the butler and your maid, have been

coming to me to gush about your progress for some time now.”

Chapter 1:

Off to Another World

THE SUN WAS STILL SHINING AS I WALKED THROUGH the city, but dusk was fast approaching. I could almost smell the cracked asphalt beneath my feet. My gaze was fixed firmly ahead.

I was born and raised in a remote seaside region with ample mountains and rivers. It wasn't until college that I moved to a city with a population of over 500,000. I got a license to drive a midsize motorbike and enjoyed my romps through the concrete jungle. The college recruiter had jobs back in my hometown, but for whatever reason, I chose to stick with city living.

After a few years, I found myself homesick beyond endurance. At work, I was praised for my diligence and given more responsibilities, but that meant I spent extra hours slogging in the office. I woke up, went to work, came home at night, and went to bed. That was my everyday life. I lost a ton of weight, wasting away. The best part of living in the city was riding my bike around at night, but I was too tired to even do that.

The long days continued until one night, at around ten o'clock, I came home and dropped my stuff off. I decided to go for a ride. It had been a while, but I'd kept up with maintenance, so it was no big deal.

A little ways into my ride, I hopped onto the highway, picking a route that'd let me savor the nighttime vista. I stopped at a restaurant facing the ocean, enjoying the view with a cup of coffee. The location was a fairly famous tourist spot, so the buildings and ships nearby were lit up and the atmosphere was buzzing. Most places were closed, but the restaurants with terrace seating were largely open. Not too long after that, I realized it was already closing time.

I don't particularly recall what happened on the way home. All I remember is riding across a long bridge over the sea, the distinct final snapshot in my memory.

When I came to, I was lying in bed. Even though I'd been on a bike moments before, I found myself at home. The ceiling seemed oddly high, and the bed was soft—and so large that it couldn't possibly have been for a child.

There was no mistaking it: I was in the corner room on the second floor of Lord Fertio's small castle. *My* room. The stone walls were familiar, as were the evenly spaced wood beams. A glowing magic crystal provided the room with light. Outside it was still dark, a beautiful starry curtain pulled over the sky. Its beauty struck me as profound, as though this was my first time seeing it. I sat up, drawn to the view outside the three-meter window.

What is this strange sensation?

I could make out the lush, green garden and stone walls. Beyond that was the southern part of the city. The main street sliced through its center, and a tall city wall and gate loomed beyond. Right when I stood up on the bed and reached out to the window to get a better look, I heard a voice from behind me.

"Ack, Lord Van! That's dangerous!"

Whoever it was, they sounded a bit scatterbrained. When I turned around, I found a girl with long, brown hair and droopy eyes. She wore a black maid uniform with a frilly white apron. It was my personal maid, Till. Despite her apparent ditziness, she was in a panic. She was probably trying to stop me as best she could.

"Right, sorry. Uh, good morning, Till." With that, I sat back down on my bed.

Till, however, froze up. "Huh?! Er, n-no, it's fine! Thank you for listening to me! B-by the way, Lord Van—just what were you trying to do?" she asked nervously.

I tilted my head and pointed at the window. "I was merely admiring the quaint landscape."

Her eyes went wide, and her lashes fluttered in bewilderment. "Lord Van, um...where did you learn such difficult words? You've only just turned two..."

Two? I'm nearly thirty years old. What is Till talking about—wait, thirty years old? And how did I get here? I went to college, started working, then got busy... Did I quit my job? No, that can't be right. Is this even Japan?

I had yet to leave the castle, but I was fairly certain I hadn't met anyone who looked Japanese. The people here weren't particularly tall, but there were many flashy types around. Everyone had distinctive facial features.

Are they all half Japanese, then? No, that's not it either. Besides, does Japan even have any castles made completely of stone? This isn't a church or a cathedral, and the soldiers walking the halls are wearing armor and wielding swords. They're clearly breaking the law when it comes to firearms and blade possession.

"Erm, Lord Van?"

I'd fallen silent to mull things over, so Till had called out to me with concern.

Hrm? Right, my name's another problem.

"My name is Van Nei Fertio, right?"

"Wow, you can already say your house's name? How wonderful! You sure are wise beyond your years." Till overflowed with praise, but I could barely focus on that.

"My father is the marquis, Jalpa Fertio... My brothers are Murcia, Jard, and Sesto... Am I right?" I asked, cocking my head to one side.

My maid's eyes nearly popped out of her skull. "C-correct. The current head of the family is the marquis, Lord Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio. Your brothers are Lord Murcia Elago Fertio, Lord Jard Gai Fertio, and Lord Sesto Ele Fertio. I'm shocked you know Lord Jard and Sesto's names... You don't see them very often."

I folded my arms with a grunt. "Where exactly am I?"

Till blinked at me, too stunned to respond.

It was time to eat, so I was escorted to the dining room. The room was stupidly huge, the table so long it would be hard to converse without shouting. Jard, Sesto, and my father were already seated. Beside each of them, a maid helped with the meal. Other servants set the table, and our butler, Esparda, stood in silence next to Father.

I, however, had *three* maids at my side. I was only two, after all. Jard was ten

and Sesto was eight, so they didn't need much assistance. They seemed uneasy in Father's strong presence, eating without a word.

The maids kindly cut the meat and root vegetables in my soup into smaller pieces. They also blew on it to make sure it wasn't too hot for me.

Mm-mmm. Well done, ladies.

Jests aside, I had apparently been reborn in this world with my memories of life in Japan. I couldn't understand what had happened, nor did any of it feel real—but the carrot-like vegetables here sure were delicious!

"Wow, my lord. I see you ate your vegetables."

"Amazing. He eats with such composure! He's not spilling any either."

Till and another young maid rattled off compliments as they fed me.

Is this some kind of hostess club? Am I some high roller? I'm willing to go as high as 30,000 yen!

Jard and Sesto side-eyed me with envy.

"What will you be learning today, Jard?" Father asked abruptly.

I didn't know if this was a nobility thing or what, but children generally did nothing in the morning. In the afternoon, they took lessons suitable for their age and trained in swordplay. My oldest brother, Murcia, was already fourteen years old and basically treated like an adult. He was busy with on-site training.

In any case, everyone under ten years old had roughly the same schedule. Father used mealtimes—once in the morning, once at night—to ask after our routines and our studies. This was just part of everyday life for us.

Regardless, Jard was flustered by the question as he faced Father. "I-I'll be studying flame magic and military formations."

Father nodded. "I see. And you, Sesto?"

Just the other day, Sesto had been appraised and his flame magic revealed. For whatever reason, he responded happily that he would be studying magic.

Then our father turned to me. "Van, what will you be doing today?"

He normally never asked, so I spoke without thinking. "There's so much I

don't know. For starters, I'd like to study up on this peculiar country."

Father, my three brothers, the maids, and Esparda all froze in shock. Then Till's whisper tore through the tense silence of the dining room.

"I-I knew it... Lord Van is a genius!"

The world I'd found myself in had three continents—one to the west, one to the east, and one in the middle—and a seemingly endless number of islands. A port with a narrow channel connected the three main lands, with another island between the central and eastern continents. This particular country was part of the western continent.

As far as I'd heard, culture here had developed to about the same level as the Middle Ages or early modern period on Earth. One major difference: this world had beasts called monsters. Fearsome giant creatures lurked in the sea, attacking any ships that dared set out, so the Age of Discovery would never happen here.

When I asked about what races inhabited this world, I was told there were all sorts. Elves, dwarves, and even demihumans existed here, much to my surprise. Most formed insular communities, rarely interacting with other races.

The existence of offensive magic also meant gunpowder hadn't really taken off. Some people were developing rudimentary guns, but the lack of research funds kept progress at a standstill. When it came to regular weapons, people fought with swords, spears, and bows. Crossbows did exist, but they paled in comparison to the potency of offensive spellcasting.

In terms of travel, it was either on foot or by horse—though there were also bipedal mounts that resembled Komodo dragons. Needless to say, the steam engine did not exist. Supposedly, other countries had transportation methods that used magic tools.

What the heck are magic tools?

Till explained them as best she could with what vague knowledge she had. Some crystals, gems, stones, and other minerals had the power to store magic. By charging them, you could make all kinds of magic tools corresponding to

different aptitudes.

Our nation was the Kingdom of Scuderia, tucked away in the southern region of the Grant continent. The king's name was Dino En Tsora Bellrinet. The sovereign's bloodline went back some 300 years, and the ruling family had steadily spread their influence since then.

Recently, His Majesty had ordered the nobles' forces to invade a small country and claim its territory. It was through this battle that my father earned his title of marquis. As nobles in a militant nation, our position was safe while we remained at peace. Should we lose our fighting prowess, however, that would almost certainly change.

That said, ours was a marquis's house. We were highly ranked among the nobility, and we had an influential voice in the kingdom due to being a warrior house. My future was nothing if not bright!

In the time that followed, I peppered Till with all sorts of questions and studied magic on my own. Rumors of my actions gradually spread throughout the house. The maids spoke as though I were a prodigy, and those words soon reached Esparda, the butler.

One day, out of the blue, he came poised to lecture me.

"You are only two years old, my lord, yet you're learning your letters and basic mathematics. How much do you know?"

Esparda peered down at me, eyes narrowed and lips pressed thin. His white hair was swept back, and he was rocking a black butler uniform. The man was quite tall, likely in his late fifties. Supposedly, he'd served my father for many years. I hadn't spoken to him until this very moment, but my first impression was that he looked like he did good work. Problem was, he was *terrifying*.

"What is the matter? I'd like you to tell me how much you know."

That's no way to speak to a two-year-old!

Suppressing fearful quivers, I considered my answer. "I can speak and understand people just fine. But I'm not very good with my letters..."

“Then what about numbers?”

“Um, I-I can do a little bit of addition and subtraction?”

Esparda went rigid. The silence stretched out so long I nearly fled the scene, but at length he held up both hands, lifting a few fingers.

“Two here, and three here. How many total?”

“F-five fingers.”

He displayed seven fingers this time. “Subtract two fingers from a total of seven.”

“Also five.”

Esparda froze again.

Our conversation that day ended there, but apparently Esparda went and told my father *something* about it, as he ended up lecturing me twice a week.

It was hell. This was work clearly not meant for a two-year-old, and there was too much of it. Moreover, he was mechanical and indifferent about everything.

Is he an android? Actually, since this is a world of monsters, does that mean he's a golem?!

With that in mind, I continued my lessons and eventually learned how to read and write. I also studied the rules of war, the peerage system, and territorial government.

They're seriously teaching a toddler this stuff...?

For two whole years, that was my life. When I turned four, I was handed a stick and forced to do something barely resembling bladework. But that...that was fun.

I'd done judo in my past life, and I'd attended a karate dojo in junior high. I was a big fan of martial arts. I swung my stick around, hit the one planted in the ground, and whacked the stick a cute maid was waving in my direction.

“Come on, my lord!”

“Wow, you're so fast! Great reflexes!”

“I knew you could do it, Lord Van!”

I smacked the maid’s stick over and over as she sang my praises. *This feels like some form of geisha entertainment. Seems like it should be taking place in a tatami room or something.*

Till also picked up a stick, eyes sparkling with anticipation, and held it low enough for me to hit.

“Hiyah!”

I put my all into swinging, but Till leapt to the side, causing me to miss.

“Hah! My victory, Lord Van!”

What is she, a little kid? In a fit of rage, I struck out at her again.

At the end of the day, I was but a four-year-old child. There was no way I could stand a chance against a fourteen-year-old. As I furiously chased after the giggling Till, waving my stick at her, two of the older maids grabbed her.

“Oh, Till...”

“You dare insult Lord Van? Do you not value your life?”



The two maids wore deadly serious looks in their eyes, and the smiles on their faces only made them more terrifying. Till blanched, her joy vanishing completely.

“Now then, Lord Van. We shall hold her down. Deliver punishment to this foolish girl!”

Till stared at me with tears in her eyes.

Punishment? My heart went out to the poor thing.

Smiling, I gripped my stick tightly. “Okay! Punishment, right? Leave it to me.”

I swung down, only to give Till’s butt an ever-so-gentle tap. Light though the blow had been, she still gave a little shriek of fear. I felt pretty bad once she started apologizing, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Man, sword practice is awesome. I’m gonna do it every single day!

And so I wound up reveling in the art of the sword. I only spent half a year sparring with the maids. After that, a young boy—a soldier-in-training—was assigned to be my partner. We mostly hit each other’s light shields with sticks, so it was more like play-fighting than anything else. The rules were simple: the first to land a strike won each match.

Other aspects of swordplay were surprisingly intricate. In judo, breaking someone’s stance was extremely important, as was procuring an advantageous position. In karate, range was key; you predicted your opponent’s reach and calculated the range so you could hit them with an effective attack. I could use those two skill sets in my swordplay.

Sure, my partner was a kid, but he was about ten years old. He was taller than me, with longer limbs—even more difficult to reach with the added length of the stick. Still, his size advantage ultimately meant little. His attack style was simple and boyish. After facing him multiple times, I could read his tells and pick out his best moves.

By the time I was five, I could fight other soldiers-in-training on equal footing. Soon, even the knights themselves said things like “Looks like Van has some real talent with a blade.”

A middle-aged knight came to me one day, drenched in sweat. He was Dee, deputy commander of the Chivalric Order and my father's best fighter.

Removing his armor, he said to me, "Lord Van, may I ask you a question?"

Beneath his simple clothes, the man was *ripped*. Less impressive than it sounds, though, since his clothes soaked up all his sweat and clung to his muscular body. The gray cloth was so drenched it had darkened to black, which kind of grossed me out.

I took a swig of water. "What is it?"

Dee extended both hands, a dead serious look on his stubbled face. "I'd like you to show me your hands."

"Uh, okay. What are you gonna do?"

Feeling somewhat uneasy, I reached a hand out. Dee reverently took it in his and examined it.

"No calluses. Your skin is still soft. Hrm, your nails are a bit long."

"S-sorry. I'll train harder when I'm an adult," I said, tugging my hand back.

Dee groaned, a deep crease in his brow. "Here I thought you spent every single night training after my apprentice beat you, but that doesn't appear to be the case."

"Studying's tough, but I'll do it when I have time. I also like the way of the sword, so..." I attempted to make excuses, thinking he was mad at me.

The knight narrowed his eyes, then looked up at the castle. "I heard that Esparda was told to make you study three times harder than normal. If you wish to get better at the sword, I can make an appeal for you."

"Oh, *that's* why I'm always studying? I thought it was weird that I was the only one hitting the books from morning to night."

This fresh truth was a real blow, and my head drooped.

Dee nodded. "That big brain of his is too devoted to scholarly pursuits. As someone with an *impartial* view, I believe you should head down the path of a swordsman, my lord. You have a natural gift. First, you need to learn proper

form and build muscle. After that, we can have you practice daily. I will make you into the greatest swordsman in the kingdom!” he declared. The look in his eyes told me he was beyond serious.

If Esparda was an egghead, then Dee was a meathead. All he did was swap out studies for sword training. They both skewed things too far in a single direction.

“I like sword practice, but I also like studying. I’m gonna work hard at both,” I said, but that only served to disappoint him.

“Grr... Fine! But when you train, I shall instruct you directly. Understood?”

First Esparda, and now Deputy Commander Dee was offering himself as a teacher. He peered into my face, waiting for my answer.

“Uh, ha ha... Just be gentle, okay?” I said with a forced smile.

“Ah ha ha! Lord Van, you are still only a child. Of course I’ll go easy on you.”

So he said, but that later proved to be a complete lie.

“Come now! A hundred upper swings, a hundred mid-sweeps, and a hundred thrusts! Let’s go!”

“L-Let me rest... I just finished running!”

“What are you saying, Lord Van? Resting comes later. Let us practice together!”

He’s no swordsman—he’s a demon!

I somehow managed to get through the swings without bursting into tears, then plopped myself down in a chair to rest.

Dee suddenly lit up. “I have a great idea, Lord Van! Resting is such a bore, is it not? Try taking your breaks in a seated position without using the chair!”

No, he isn’t a demon. He’s just stupid. How is that resting? You big dummy.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have the energy to even complain, so I just hung my head.

Just like that, a year went by. Now six years old, I barely ever lost to the boys in soldier training. There was quite the size difference between a six-year-old and someone who was twelve or thirteen. My partners' range and build surpassed mine, and they had the upper hand in strength and speed. But when it came to observation, reflexes, and knowledge? Well, the boys tried copying my strategies, but they had a long way to go.

You see, the knights prioritized speed and power—they had no concept of a feint. A knight with fast swings could force an opponent to block high, then strike at their waist in a flurry of blows. A powerful knight could restrict their opponent's attack window, then bring their sword down from above. That sort of thing.

Right when my partners were poised to strike, I'd pull back or move diagonally and lead them around by the nose. As they swung and missed, it opened them up for the perfect counterattack. Kids weren't good with strategies that required patience, so I took my time dealing with my opponents. The ones who came at me with sequential attacks subconsciously braced themselves for a block or a parry. I'd let them miss once or twice to break their rhythm.

Opponents who prioritized brute force were all about range and surprise attacks. When they thought they could land a hit, they would put an excess amount of power behind their biggest swings. Those were easy enough to dodge. As for the surprise attacks, they came in three forms: a rare sweep at the legs, an upward slash from below, and a strike from behind after circling from the front.

Being both short and clumsy on my feet, I wasn't an easy target. The "first strike" rule also worked to my advantage. While my days may have been hellish, they were nonetheless enriching.

One day, Till flashed me her usual smile and said something wholly unexpected. "You've grown so mature as of late, my lord. You're book-smart, a sword savant... You might very well surpass all of your brothers to become the next head of the family!"

My breath caught in my throat at that. I'd learned from Esparda that the

world of nobility was a vicious one. Only the strong survived. Unfortunately, the same principle held true among myself and my brothers.

Becoming the next head would completely change our course in life. Money, status, honor, power... Whoever took up the mantle of marquis would inherit it all. Being second best would mean nothing. If we were close, it might be possible to serve the head as an underling, but most noble children who failed to secure their parents' title left the house for good.

It was not unheard of for blood to be spilled over inheritance. All too often, a younger brother would surpass his elder brother to become head of the family. Nothing fueled an older sibling's rage more than their status being snatched away right under their nose. To prevent this, noble heirs would murder whichever sibling looked to be the most likely candidate for the spot.

Unfortunately, I had very few interactions with my brothers. If anything, Jard and Sesto made sure to turn away from me whenever our eyes met. We certainly were not close. Murcia frequently showed up at the soldiers' training grounds, so I had at least exchanged greetings with him, but who knew what would happen in the future?

Setting aside my candidacy for marquis, my odds of getting snuffed out would go up the more I stood out from the rest. I had already garnered too much attention—this was *not* good. During my strolls through the castle, the maids, butlers, and guards would go out of their way to say hello. From my brothers' perspective, I probably looked like a little brat getting a big head.

I had to do something.

"Hey, Till?"

"Yes? What is it?" she asked, smiling warmly.

"I want to play outside."

"Huh?"

I'd made my choice: I would become a man who lived for fun. I'd goof around until I was level twenty!

The carriage swayed to and fro as it rolled down the path. It was a sturdy vehicle, large enough to comfortably hold six people. The interior was brown and white with red accents. Gazing out the window, I saw all the hustle and bustle of the city. Wooden buildings and a stone structure akin to a church were within view. Horses and carriages traveled every which way. As far as I could tell, there were no elves or demihumans to be found, only regular humans.

I never got tired of seeing merchants or knights. I assumed that the guys wandering around in old clothing or robes were sexual deviants. Dang pervs were walking around with grins.

Till, who'd been gazing out the window along with me, broke the silence. "Where would you like to go, my lord?"

"I want to visit a big store," I blurted out.

"A big store..." She looked upward, thinking. "Then shall we visit the Mary Chamber of Commerce? It's an enormous company with locations all across the kingdom. You can get just about anything in one of their stores."

"Ooh, that sounds great! You sure know a whole lot, Till."

"Hee hee."

Till giggled and bashfully poked her tongue out. Satisfied, I turned back to the window. Hawkers called out to passersby, and the citizens laughed loudly among themselves. The world outside was brimming with life and vigor.

I enjoyed some more people-watching, and soon the carriage came to a stop.

"We've arrived, sir."

The driver's tone was a bit curt, but given the way he kept his head bowed low, he probably just wasn't used to dealing with nobility.

I smiled at him. "Thank you."

The man scratched his jaw and nodded his head repeatedly. "Of course. Uh, right this way."

He opened the door for us, and Till got out first so that she could take me by the hand. Normally these things were supposed to be the other way around, but maybe an onlooker would've seen her as an older sister helping her little

brother.

After I disembarked from the carriage, the two knights who'd followed behind on our journey lined up on either side of us. I made sure to thank them.

I peered up at the large stone building in front of us. And when I say large, I mean *huge*. If I were to describe it in terms of modern-day Japan, I would've likened it to a supermarket. It was two floors tall, so perhaps more like a gymnasium. The big double doors were wide open, and the window frames were intricately designed, lending it all a very classy feel. I was quite the fan.

Before I could step inside, an angry shout sounded from the main street.

"Get your ass over here!"

The speaker clearly had no intention of hiding their scorn, so I whirled around to gawk. A man on the other side of the street was yanking a rope while he walked. On closer inspection, a heap of dirty old rags was moving at the end of the rope. I squinted to get a better look—and discovered that this heap was in fact a human child. Certainly older than me, though.

When the man noticed our eyes on him, he took a fearful step back. Face flushing, he scowled at us. "Wh-what're you looking at? This ain't no show!"

Our two knights reached for the hilt of their swords. Despite clearly being afraid, the man didn't back down, and I could feel the atmosphere growing heavy.

Looking to dissolve the tension, I said, "Hey, why do you have that child on a rope?"

His brow furrowed. "Came here to sell him on the slave market."

I glanced at Till, who then made a complicated expression. "Is that boy yours?" she asked him.

"Er, yeah! He's *my* son and he carries *my* debt, so I'm sellin' him. Got a problem with that?" The man spoke as if it were obvious, jabbing a finger at the child behind him.

"Your debt?" I echoed, puzzled.

Till stepped in to explain, her voice heavy with sadness. "According to the law,

there are only two recognized reasons for someone to be sold into slavery: when they're in deep debt, or when they've committed a crime. That being said, there's a long history of poor families selling off their hungry children in exchange for living expenses. It works via transfer of debt, getting around the laws even though they're just kids."

Everyone around us looked on with cold stares. The fact that no one else said anything or looked remotely upset spoke to how ingrained this slavery system was. People here were used to this.

Someone else spoke up then. "Well, if it isn't the marquis's son!"

The voice belonged to a woman in her thirties who emerged from inside the store. She'd greeted us, but how did she know I was part of the marquis's family?

I tilted my head and looked to Till for clarification.

"Right you are, ma'am! This is the famous prodigy, Lord Van Nei Fertio! For proof, look no further than his crest!" Till declared with a nod, pointing at my back.

What's she talking about?

Curious, I checked to find that the coat I had over my shoulders bore a bull and a blade on the back. It was our family crest—the monstrous behemoth and the magic sword used to defeat it. For the record, this was just a tall tale, as there was no magic sword at home.

Anyhow, enough about my family's crest.

"I was wearing this the whole time?"

How did I not notice this when they changed my clothes? How embarrassing.

Before I could get too down in the dumps over the unwanted fashion choice, the woman from the store beamed at me.

"I knew it! Now, now, come right in! What are you searching for? We have everything you could possibly need! Ah, I am Rosalie, by the way. It is an absolute pleasure to meet you." Rosalie offered an animated curtsy.

"The marquis...?" The man groaned, and I glanced over at him. His face was

pale, and he inched away from the scene. Considering his unscrupulous use of the law to sell his own child into slavery, he was probably nervous he might get arrested.

With that in mind, I turned back to Rosalie. “A question, if I may. That man came to sell off his own child. How much would the boy go for?”

Rosalie glared at the man in question. “A boy of about eight... What’s his magical aptitude?”

The man shrank in on himself. “Th-thieving magic.”

“No more than three large silvers,” Rosalie answered immediately.

Despite his apparent confusion, the man fought back. “W-wait just a second! This store is supposed to offer five large silvers or more no matter what kind of slave it is! This brat’s still young! He’ll be good for years! He should fetch a higher price!”

Rosalie snorted and folded her arms. “Any shop is going to offer half or less of his value. You should be happy your child would fetch you three large silvers. That said, the shop’s going to sell him for six or seven large silvers. You’d probably get double or more if he were a girl, but boys aren’t useful when they’re small. They have to be raised and taught, so that factors into the pricing.” she explained, causing the man to grind his teeth and look down at the child.

“Damn it all!” The man ground his teeth, and his head snapped toward the boy. “Useless brat! Fine, I’ll take three large silvers! Cough up the cash!”

He shoved his son forward with brutish force. The boy stumbled, sprawling on the ground with a groan.

Rosalie stared daggers at him. “How can you treat a child like that? Isn’t he your son? Can’t you be more—”

“Shut up! Stay out of my business!”

That was enough to push her over the edge. Her shoulders quaked as her anger reached a fever pitch. “Do *not* make a fool of me! I can just as easily decide I don’t want him! If you’re really trying to sell him, then even if you have

to lie, you could at least—”

“All of you bastards look down on me! I wasn’t planning on sellin’ him to you people anyway! C’mon, we’re goin’ to another shop!”

“Aah!”

The man’s face was bright red with rage as he yanked on the rope, causing the boy to cry out in pain. His eyes shone with tears, and Rosalie was fuming.

“I’ll buy him,” I heard myself say. “How does five large silvers sound?”

If the boy continued down this path, he might suffer an early death. When that thought flashed through my head, I couldn’t stand by any longer.

The man and Rosalie both gaped at me, but instead I turned to Till. “Do I have the money for that?”

Till quickly pulled out a leather bag. “Um, yes! The money is right here!” She retrieved a handful of coins bearing the raised image of a horse—but they were gold.

“Do we have any silvers, Till? Five of them, to be exact.”

My maid rummaged faster, but Rosalie reached a hand out to stop her. “We can do an exchange at the store. Leave it to me.”

She stepped inside, and soon she returned with ten large silvers and gave five back to Till.

“You’d best be grateful for Lord Van’s kindness,” she spat, tossing the money to the man who’d just sold his son.

He looked furious, but when the coins landed on the ground, he scraped them all into his hands and left the scene. The poor boy he left behind had no clue what to do, so he simply squatted down in terror.

“Hey, what’s your name?” I asked him.

The boy looked through the opening of his long, unkempt hair and whispered, “Khamsin.”

While I’d certainly never planned on it, I had bought a slave. I felt like a terrible person, but I’d just have to live with that for the moment.

“Khamsin, great. And Rosalie, since we caused you so much trouble, we’ll buy him some clothes and necessities from here, all right?”

Rosalie lit up. “My, thank you very much! I would be delighted to select something nice for him. Come now, Khamsin. Let’s pick out a new outfit together. Ah, but before that, the slave contract...”

She brought Khamsin to his feet and over to me, then took both of our hands. Immediately after, a gentle sensation flooded through my whole body, and my hand began to glow. The light spread across the back of my hand, sketching out a symbol. It turned out to be a seal of some kind, depicting a winged horse.

“What is this?” I asked quietly.

“That’s the symbol of a slave contract. I am a contract mage, you see. There will be no contract fee this time around, since this is your first time here,” Rosalie told me, puffed up with pride.



I never intended to form a contract, but oh well.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile.

After her moment of glory, Rosalie snapped back to her senses with a shout and gave a reverent dip of her head. “My deepest apologies, sir! N-now then, follow me! I shall lead the way!”

Evidently, she’d only just remembered that I was a member of the marquis’s family and snapped herself back into customer-service mode. I trailed behind her, my smile growing wider.

“Here’s the food section, and these are our spices. Daily necessities can be found over there. We also sell tableware and sundries. Oh, would you like to pick out Khamsin’s clothes first?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Come along, then!”

She escorted us to the clothing section, which had all sorts of attire: Western-style garb, traditional dress, and simple sack gowns with holes for one’s arms and head.

“This is fairly standard for slaves, and it’ll run you one copper coin. Anything with fine needlework and good-quality cloth will cost one to five silvers.”

Going by the groceries, a single copper was equivalent to about 1,000 Japanese yen as far as I could tell, which meant a silver coin was something like 10,000 yen and a large silver 100,000.

So Khamsin himself cost me roughly 500,000 yen?

I perused the clothes as I pondered the value of currency in this world.

“I like this one,” I said, pointing at a particular set. “If he’s going to be around Till a lot, this will help him blend right in.”

Rosalie’s smile went taut. “Um, those garments are made with a rather fine cloth, so they cost three silvers.” Her gaze slid over to Till, as did mine.

My maid thrust out her chest. “Leave it to me! I have Lord Van’s money right here!” she cried, as though the money were her own.

I took the bag from her with a smile and withdrew the appropriate amount. "All that's left is some underwear and shoes, I think."

"Thank you so much! In that case, we have shoes that match that outfit perfectly!" Rosalie said.

Thus, my very first day out consisted of me buying both a boy and his wardrobe. To call it unexpected would be an understatement.

"Um, Lord Van? Deputy Commander Dee has been looking for you," Khamsin said, looking fidgety even in his sleek black butler uniform.

I handed him a cookie. "Take this and tell him I'm not here."

Khamsin scrunched up his face. A solid scrubbing had washed away all the dirt, revealing his plain features, scrawny build, and deep-blue hair. Much to my surprise, formal attire suited him well. *Darn.*

"I think he already knows you're here, though." Nevertheless, he chomped down on the cookie and slipped out of the room. When he spoke next, his voice was muffled. "Erm, Lord Van is not in at the moment."

"Is that so? But I heard he went into this room earlier!"

"I looked for him, but he wasn't there."

"Huh?! Young man, are those crumbs around your mouth? There was nothing there a moment ago!"

"...I have no idea what 'crumbs' you're talking about."

"You just ate them! Argh... You've been paid off! You have a lot of nerve ignoring the orders of the deputy commander of the Chivalric Order!"

"I-I'm Lord Van's slave, so..."

Khamsin refused to bend the knee to Dee's pressure, plainly proclaiming himself my ally.

Dee groaned loudly. "Fine! Talking back to me takes guts, you know. I think I'll train you in his stead! Consider it an honor!"

"Wait, m-me?"

What a delightful conversation.

Dee ended up dragging Khamsin off, which meant he was going to endure the hellish training in my place.

Poor kid.

Feeling guilty, I quietly followed them.

After Khamsin had turned into a pile of mush, I appeared in front of Dee to take on the rest of the training session. From here on out, I'd have Khamsin do the first half, then I'd handle the second. It was unfortunate that I couldn't leave Esparda's lessons to him too.

Chapter 2:

Magical Aptitude

TIME WHIZZED BY, AND NOW I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD. The tiny prodigy who'd taken on Esparda's and Dee's hardcore lessons had morphed into a slothful child. At least, that was how I wanted everyone to think of me.

I was happy that things had gone according to plan, but I'd never anticipated doing so poorly as to be shipped off to a village in the middle of nowhere.

When I returned to my room after the assessment, Till and Khamsin were anxious to hear the results.

"How did it go?" Till asked.

I smiled and nodded.

"That means you've got flame magic, right?" My maid looked delighted—until I shook my head.

Next it was Khamsin's turn. "Erm... Wind magic, then? The same as Murcia?"

I shook my head again, and the two went quiet.

"I have production magic."

Frozen in place, all they could do was blink. And after several seconds of silence, Khamsin spoke up in a whisper. "Um, I'm not familiar with that kind. Is it uncommon?"

It wasn't uncommon, no. It was just that those who had that aptitude did not make it public.

"Well, I suppose you don't see it much among the nobility," I replied with a pained smile while Till finally rebooted.

"Oh, b-but, um, Lord Van... You're immensely talented, so I'm sure you'll be given a key position in the family! I wholeheartedly believe that!"

A dry laugh escaped my lips. "I mean, I was given territory, so I suppose I did get a key position."

“Really?! That’s incredible! That’s huge!”

As soon as I answered, Till leapt up in joy, prompting Khamsin to grin as well. My next words sapped their enthusiasm in an instant.

“I’ll be in charge of a nameless border village.”

The fact that my aptitude wasn’t one of the four elements was to be kept secret. Anyone who knew the truth was under strict orders to remain silent. The problem was that one couldn’t just board up a person’s lips. It wasn’t long before rumors of my poor result rippled throughout the house.

Meanwhile, I was busy preparing to leave. Murcia had lent me money, so I had the funds and the manpower I needed. All of my clothes, daily necessities, and weapons were loaded onto three carriages. I wasn’t allowed to bring any of the knights, so Murcia hired ten ruffians—that is, adventurers—as my protection detail.

Originally, I was only going to have a single carriage, with Khamsin as my caretaker and sole companion. It was awful. Fortunately, Till had intervened and managed to get herself on board.

The three of us squeezing into a single carriage might be a tight fit, though.

Then Dee showed up in full armor and wielding a sword. He, too, had strong-armed his way into coming along. Something about being my bodyguard, apparently.

“I plan on drilling all of my warrior know-how into you, Lord Van! Ha ha ha!”

Please, no more.

Before I could protest, Dee began chatting up my workers and getting a carriage ready. I suddenly had two large carriages added to the mix, and Dee and two other knights took positions at the rear.

Esparda was the final person to join our little caravan.

“I told Lord Jalpa that I would be retiring effective immediately. Early though it may be, I have already trained a successor, so he willingly accepted. I am fifty-five years old now, so I’d like to spend the rest of my days relaxing away from

the bustle of the city. I assume you're fine with this?" Though he posed it as a question, he wasn't going to take no for an answer. He'd rolled up with a carriage ready to go.

When did he have time for this? Also, did my father really let a butler who's served him for so many years go without a fight? Finding someone who can follow in his footsteps had to have been tremendously difficult.

When I cast a doubtful glance at him, he climbed into the carriage and flashed me a fearless smile. "I suppose I can look over your studies as a bit of entertainment, Lord Van."

With that said, he entered the carriage.

Please, everybody! Stop already!

I had to wonder if they'd all conspired to do this. What was wrong with both Dee and Esparda? Why would they join me in the middle of nowhere? I itched to tell them to quit it, but the reality was that having them with me would be a massive help. Dee was a peerless swordsman, Esparda an exceptional scholar.

I climbed into my carriage, conflicted.

"Hear some good news?" Till asked me, looking chipper.

"What?" I might as well have had a question mark floating over my head.

Till bobbed her head, grinning. "You have a big smile on your face."

That was when it clicked. Despite my posturing, I'd been pretty worried about being sent away. I was actually *happy* that everyone was coming with me.

"Honestly, I'm glad you're all tagging along. Thanks."

Till's grin turned impish as she pointed at herself. "Actually, there were a few maids who wanted to go with you. But I told Lord Murcia that I'm your personal maid and protected the spot with my life!" She gave her seat a proud pat.

"Aw, you should have just brought anyone who wanted to come..."

Why does she have to make it like some kind of tournament? Truthfully, I was saddened by the news. My days of being surrounded by cute maids were over.

Till was too lost in her reverie to address it. "I don't know the details, but Lord

Murcia is very busy and seldom speaks to the maids. Lords Jard and Sesto likewise pay us no mind. But you? You're different. You greet us every day. You've even shared your snacks and helped us clean. The maids who trained with you love you, my lord."

Finding her comments a bit embarrassing, I looked over at Khamsin. "What about you, Khamsin? You could stay behind if you like. I can change our contract or even terminate it, and I'm sure Murcia would look after you if I asked."

Much to my surprise, Khamsin fixed me with a glare. "Lord Van, I made the decision to serve you as long as I live. No matter what happens, I will spend my life at your side."

"Um, did you just propose to me? I didn't realize you loved me so much."

His words were almost *too* flattering, so I tried to brush them off with a joke, but Khamsin gave me a strong nod.

"I do. I love you, Lord Van. I adore you."

My plan had backfired, and I'd prompted him to say something even more embarrassing! Khamsin really had grown. Moved by his words, I dipped my head in thanks. I'd prepared for this journey thinking I would have to endure exile all on my own, but now I had four of my closest companions alongside me. I was truly grateful.

"All right, it's about time we get going."

With that, the carriages set off.

Father didn't want word of my exile to spread, so we traveled incognito. I couldn't open the windows too far, and we had to speak in hushed whispers. Also, none of the carriages bore our family crest.

I opened the window just a crack to get a better view of the passing scenery. "I came here to play a lot in the last two years... This is kind of sad."

Right then, a child popped up beside our carriage. "Lord Van!"

"Oh, if it isn't Viza. Hi there."

Viza was the daughter of one of the city guards. I'd bumped into her

numerous times on my trips.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” she asked, looking upset. “Why?”

“Huh? D-did you hear that from someone?”

Viza pointed at the rear. I poked my head out the window to see that Dee’s carriage was flying a banner that read LORD VAN’S DEPARTURE!

“Aw, c’mon! That’s so embarrassing!”

One of Dee’s underlings, a young knight atop his horse, noticed us staring. “The banner was crafted under the deputy commander’s orders! He was deeply saddened that you had to leave like a thief in the night, so he at least wanted to announce your departure...”

“Didn’t Father tell him to keep this under wraps?”

The young knight grinned mischievously. “Is that so? First I’ve heard of it! My guess is that Deputy Commander Dee did so without knowing. We could lower the banner, but he’s currently asleep in his carriage... My apologies! When he awakens, I’ll explain the situation right away!”

Behind him, Dee poked his head out the window. “The youngest son of the marquis, Van Nei Fertio, is leaving the estate! Be sure to give him a grand send-off! Those who wish to offer their services can do so thusly...”

Eyes narrowed, I flicked my gaze back to the young knight. “He looks awake to me.”

“Uh, oops! Sorry, my lord—looks like I’m due on patrol! I’ll merely be circling the perimeter around the carriages, so fear not!” With one last smile, the knight nudged his steed in the other direction.

People gathered around us, and I knew many of them quite well.

“Where are you going, Lord Van?!”

“Come back soon!”

“Are you going to the academy in the capital?!”

Once I’d shaken off my initial stupor, I addressed the crowd through the window. “Hi, everyone! I’m heading off for a little while!” I even greeted those

I'd only ever spoken to once or twice. "Goodbye for now!"

Seeing my most beloved townspeople crying over my departure had me sniffing. Even though I was the one leaving them behind, tears streamed down my cheeks. I'd thought I was fine with this, but apparently not. When I sat back down, wiping at my eyes, Till offered me a handkerchief. Her outright bawling proved she was just as much of a mess as I was.

"Here, little lord. Meat's done."

After passing through two relay towns, it was finally time for my first campout. Back on Earth, I'd slept in all kinds of vehicles, but it was my first time doing this in a world of monsters. When I poked my head out of the carriage, I came face-to-face with a skewer of meat. The man holding it was the leader of our band of adventurers, an intimidating guy with a huge scar running down his cheek.

I had some concerns.

We'd hired two different adventurer parties for protection, and everyone looked quite strong. Half of them were battle mages, and of the ten adventurers in total, two were women. One was a bulky warrior type, the other a slender robed mage. At first glance, the latter looked nothing like an adventurer.

The grizzled guy in front of me was a skilled adventurer named Ortho Sheet. He had a scary mug, but since he'd been in the business for two decades, he was used to dealing with clients. Despite my age, he had no issues with talking to me—but his etiquette needed some work.

"Thanks. Good job watching out for everyone. Make sure you get some rest when it's your turn," I said, taking the skewer from him.

Ortho stared at me in disbelief, blinking repeatedly.

"Is something wrong?"

"Nah, not at all. I'll be reportin' back to you later." With a strained smile, he dipped his head and left.

“Wonder what that was all about.”

Till tittered with pride beside me. “Seems to me like that adventurer understands why you’re so great. But he’s nowhere near my level! I can rattle off *hundreds* of your best character traits, my lord!”

I let out a dry laugh. Till had her head in the clouds as always.

Our journey took about two weeks. We stayed in four different villages—one night each—but after the second, we did a lot more outdoor camping. Due to all the stuff we were carrying, we went at a pretty leisurely pace. I figured we traveled somewhere between fifty and a hundred kilometers a day, so we must’ve covered anywhere from five hundred to a thousand kilometers by the end of it. Quite the distance. That also spoke to how vast our family’s territory was. In terms of Japan’s geography, it was like crossing three to four prefectures. I found myself wondering exactly *how* far it was.

While I was musing over all this, we finally arrived at the nameless village. The carriage jerked to a halt before we reached the entrance.

“Is something wrong?” Till asked the driver, who was wide-eyed with panic.

“Oh no, this is awful! The village is being attacked!”

I quickly stuck my head out the window. Beyond Dee and his two knights’ guard detail, dozens of people had surrounded the village. They were clad in all sorts of gear...and fully armed. Powerful warriors in armor loomed in front of the main gate, with a group of what looked like mages behind them.

Ortho swooped in close, scowling. “They’ve gotta be bandits or mercs on the run—the kind of scum who’ll go after the weak in a heartbeat. They’re clearly experienced, though.”

I could see that. The assailants were keeping their distance to minimize risks, instead choosing to fire arrows into the village. While the village was wrapped in thick wooden fencing, it provided little protection from projectiles that sailed over the top. I could see the villagers through gaps in the fencing, glaring at their attackers. If any of them tried to flee or fight back, they’d be riddled with arrows and spells. No ordinary person would be able to cut through their ranks,

so all they could do was hole up in the village to protect themselves.

“Permission to engage, Lord Van? If we all join the battle, we can handle them!”

As far as I could tell, they had forty or fifty men total. Even with the benefit of a surprise attack, we didn’t know how strong the enemy was, and we already had the disadvantage in terms of numbers. On the flip side, I knew Dee had some serious skills, and the veteran adventurers with us were no slouches either.

Can we actually win?

“Well—”

“Hold your horses, kid. It’s way too dangerous.”

Dee frowned and glared at Ortho for the interruption. “I’m aware of the dangers. There will be casualties, but we can most certainly push them back.” His voice was grave as he gripped his sword.

The adventurer shook his head. “One of my rules is to never take on any jobs that could cost my party members their lives. When you work as an adventurer for as long as I have, you’re forced to run into all kinds of tight spots. If I took the risk every time, I’d be long dead by now.”

Anger blazed in Dee’s eyes. “There comes a time when one must put their life on the line. That time is now! That village is the young lord’s first territory, which makes those people his first subjects. If I do not draw my sword to protect them, who will?!”

He unsheathed his sword, but Ortho refused to back down.

“Your chivalry’s admirable, but unfortunately, that’s got nothing to do with us. Even if you were to pay us extra, money means nothing if we’re dead. During your travels, you come across wrecked towns and villages and folks getting attacked by monsters. Then you pass right on by. Sorry to say, but this place is no exception.”

“Grr...! Th-then at least protect Lord Van! If the situation calls for it, you can even evacuate with him.”

Ortho gave a curt nod. In the worst-case scenario, he and his people could flee.

That was when Esparda cut in. “I’m against this plan. Sir Dee aside, the other two knights will certainly perish. In other words, Sir Dee will be facing a fighting force thirty men strong, including mages. As far as I can tell, he has a 50 percent chance of victory. Should Sir Dee die, there is no future for this village even if Lord Van were to reign over it,” Esparda explained almost callously.

In other words, we could only win with the adventurers’ help.

Ortho furrowed his brow. “Just to be clear, we’re *not* fighting. And we’re in no position to go into battle while protecting a child and all the luggage.”

Esparda shot him an icy stare. “This might be hard to believe, but I am an elemental mage. And fortunately for us, there is plenty of earth to go around underfoot. You can rely on my combat prowess.”

“What? You can fight? Even then, I...”

At Ortho’s hesitation, Esparda nodded encouragingly. “You won’t need to charge in and put your lives on the line. First, I will create a barrier wall. You and your party will use long-range attacks from behind it. While the enemy is focused on us, Dee and his men will attack from the side. If we overlap sneak attacks, our chances of winning are high.”

“Can that barrier of yours block magic? Also, if the arrows come down on us from above, we’re done for.”

“These carriages have steel plating lining all the important parts. Once you launch the initial attack, you can fall back and shut yourselves in. We are merely going for a diversion, after all.”

Something about it felt off to me. I wasn’t sure how powerful that first attack was supposed to be, but Dee and the others would definitely be in danger. Their chances of losing were still high.

That meant Esparda had something else planned.

“You’re going to stay and fight, aren’t you?”

He offered a casual nod. “But of course. If I don’t continue to serve as a decoy

and launch attacks from behind the wall, Dee and his men will be slaughtered.”

“I get it. A pincer attack is most effective—I remember that from my studies. But this plan is no good. You’re going to die.” My tone was sharp, but Esparda’s face lit up with an unusually tender smile.

“Allow me one selfish request. Let these old bones show off for once.”

“In that case, I’ll be the decoy.”

Everyone gaped at me, flabbergasted.

“No! Absolutely not! I won’t allow it!” Till shouted.

I immediately feared the enemy would overhear us, but they were too far away, the din of combat too loud. Relief washed over me.

“If you’re going to be the decoy, then I’d rather confront the enemy myself. You all can attack while I distract them. If you take me out too, you can win!” Till grabbed my hand, tears streaming from her eyes.

Khamsin nodded, humble and determined. “I will accompany you. The two of us can distract the enemy together!”

Why would they volunteer to throw their lives away? I’m having none of this.

“Just to be clear, *I’m* the one in charge here. This is my territory, therefore it’s my problem. Ortho and his men agreed to guard me, not fight my battles. There’s no need for them to stick their necks out on my behalf.”

I glanced at Ortho, whose shoulders had leapt to his ears in surprise. That puzzled me, but I turned to Esparda next.

“And you. You have retired. There is no reason someone who has served my family for so long should die here.”

Esparda’s expression hardened. *Perhaps I was too cold in my wording.* Reflecting on that, I addressed Dee and his men.

“Dee, you and your knights belong to Father’s order. He is the one you serve, not me. You shouldn’t be risking your lives here.”

Dee and his knights wore harsh expressions, but perhaps they always did.

Finally, I faced Till and Khamsin. “Maybe this is selfish of me, but I’ve always

thought of you as my big sister, Till. I don't want to let someone so important to me become a victim in this battle. And Khamsin, even though you're older than me, you've been like a little brother. If I die here, I want you to enjoy life to the fullest for me. You're free."

The dam broke, and tears flooded down my cheeks.

Forcing a smile, I explained my plan. "First, I'll ride the carriage in on them from the front. I want you all to perform a pincer attack from the sides. Use ranged attacks, nothing too extreme. If it looks like the enemy isn't backing down, please run. You can abandon my corpse. As long as I don't announce my name, there shouldn't be any problems for the marquis."

I smiled self-deprecatingly, but nobody laughed. *Whoops.*

I drew my decorative sword and was about to march when a loud sigh rose up from the rear.

"Fine. Man, just this once! Our lives are in your hands!" Ortho said, stepping forward.

"Wait, Ortho!"

Flustered, I tried to turn him down, but he flashed me a troubled smile. "I've got a kid in front of me putting his life on the line in the name of responsibility. My party's gonna tear me apart if I keep whining." With that, he brought out his own blade.

The female mage in his party stepped up to join him. "Frankly, I didn't think much of nobles and their so-called 'readiness' to do what needs to be done. Haven't met many decent ones, y'know? But all that's changed in the last two weeks." She smiled shyly. "It's thanks to you, Lord Van."

"Gosh, Pluriel..."

She laughed. "I can't believe you went and memorized the names of a ragtag group of adventurers like us. You really are a weird one, Lord Van. But that's why we're willing to step up for you." Her voice tapered off to a whisper, and she drew her short sword adorned with magic seals.

I can't tell her I only remember her name because she's so cute!

My awkwardness grew as the other adventurers came forward. While I reeled, Dee and his men declared their support as well.

“We are proud knights who serve the marquis and his household. Needless to say, we serve Lord Van, who shoulders the future of that house. Protecting you here means protecting your family’s future.” Dee and his men brought out their blades and held them before their faces in a demonstration of their oath.

Man, he’s good at the whole sophistry thing.

I was weirdly impressed until Esparda stood next to him. “Once we have defeated the enemy, I will teach you the weight of being a successor to the marquis. Fear not—it will take only half a day.”

That’s way too long! He’s just being spiteful!

“Let me revise my earlier plan, my lord.” Esparda gave his orders in a low, powerful voice. “First, I will create a wall, then attack at range. Dee and his knights will charge in from the left flank. Ortho, you and yours will attack from the right. Anyone who can provide protection or first aid, be ready.”

“Got it!”

“Understood!”

Everyone moved at once. Esparda started chanting, activating his earth magic. An earthen wall burst forth from the ground about twenty meters ahead. He and the adventurers skilled in long-range attacks immediately headed toward it.

I watched everyone in amazement for a bit until Till and Khamsin latched on to me.

“Thank goodness... Thank goodness, Lord Van!”

“When the time comes, I will die as your shield, my lord!”

Both of them spoke to me through their tears, and I had to do my damndest not to fall to pieces. They were more of a family to me than my own flesh and blood. I felt that strongly as I stroked their hair.

Much as I wanted to immerse myself in that feeling, we were about to go into battle. If there was something we could do, we had to do it.

“Okay, guys. Let’s take all the medicines and first aid supplies out of the carriages. If anyone looks like they need help, we gotta move. Be ready.”

I smiled, and both of them wiped their tears away.

“Got it!” they cried in unison.

The bandits had let their guard down.

When they first found out the territory had changed hands, they knew security would be at its lightest. Had the village been vital in some way, the new noble in charge would have been on top of things, but it wasn’t—just a no-name settlement in the middle of nowhere.

Getting a foothold in newly acquired territory took time. Initial tasks included dispatching the lord, determining the amount of taxes to collect, and figuring out the state things were in, not to mention maintaining the peace. It also took a while to put together a detachment of knights for protection, and if they didn’t adequately communicate with the previous guard, unwanted battles could break out.

Since tackling every town at the same time was too difficult, one always had to begin with the most important cities. After that came midsize towns and villages, then small towns and settlements. When nobles handled takeovers poorly, tiny towns on the fringes wouldn’t even know that their lord had changed. It spoke to the lengthy process involved in organizing information and managing personnel.

Thus, this group of bandits had aimed for this tiny village in the sticks knowing this was the time to do so. It would be an easy job. They’d shoot arrows over the walls to scare the villagers, get some coin and supplies, take the women and children, and split.

It was precisely this overconfidence that had lowered their guard. They fired round after round of arrows so the villagers couldn’t come out. Though the townsfolk had denied the bandits entrance, they were bound to surrender to the relentless assault.

“Been a while since we’ve had women.”

“Not since that merchant’s girls, huh?”

“There were only two of ’em too. They broke real quick.”

“Looks like we got at least ten this time.”

“Bwa ha ha ha ha!”

All the bandits were indulging in such idle banter, treating the invasion as though it were a festival. Drinking, singing, the whole deal. They couldn’t bear to quit the bandit life with all its rowdy escapades.

Just a few moments after that raucous laugh, an arrow plunged deep into a bandit’s neck.

As I watched Dee clean the blood off of his sword, a chill skittered down my spine. It had only taken ten minutes. A measly ten minutes that both felt long and short. Things had gone completely in our favor.

Our group had annihilated the bandits. A few had slipped away, but most were dead and the rest were at death’s door. Some time after the battle ended, I sensed the villagers gathering beyond the village entrance.

Men and women holding spears and shields were lined up, watching through the openings in the wooden fence. I counted about fifty people. If that was the combat force of this place, then they were extremely vulnerable. For a village this size, though, that was probably a decent number.

I sighed, taking stock of the village once more. The wooden fence used thick posts, and it looked well taken care of. But at the end of the day, wood was wood. From what I could see, the houses crammed side by side beyond the fence were made of wood too. If the Kingdom of Yelenetta or Lord Ferdinatto sent knights to occupy the village, they could effortlessly set it ablaze with flaming arrows. There were only two reasons this hadn’t happened: a dragon lived in the Wolfsbrook Mountains, and the village wasn’t a particularly convenient base. I doubted this place would ever become a battlefield, but the people here would be crushed like ants if it did.

As I grappled with my apprehension, Till came up next to me. “Well, my lord...

things turned out a bit differently than we imagined, but we've arrived at the village."

"Right." I nodded. "This is my first time meeting these people. We have to introduce ourselves."

I made my way to the village entrance with a whole entourage: two knights in front of me, Dee and Esparda on either side, and Till and Khamsin behind me. Ortho and the others were keeping an eye on the carriages and a few bandits we'd taken as prisoners.

The villagers stirred at our approach. Once I had their attention, I opened my mouth to speak.

"Hi there. My name is Van Nei Fertio. I come from House Fertio, the nobles who control this territory—your village included. From here on out, I'm gonna be in charge of this place. I don't intend to make unreasonable demands or heavily tax anyone, so please rest easy."

At my very un-noble-like greeting, the villagers exchanged glances, whispering to one another in confusion.

Esparda's brow wrinkled, and he stepped forward. "Your new governor, Lord Van, has arrived. Open the gate." His voice, though quiet, held far more gravity than mine.

A small elderly man broke off from the crowd. "Open the gates," he said, and the villagers quickly did so.

Men and women in their twenties and thirties readied their shields and spears. Standing in front of them all was the old man, who held no weapons.

"I am Ronda, the village mayor. You have my gratitude for saving us. Thank you." He bowed deeply to punctuate his polite introduction.

"I hear that up until now, no lord or security of any kind has ever been dispatched to your village," I said. "First off, allow me to apologize for that. I plan on protecting this place as its lord, so I ask for both your understanding and your assistance."

No noble would ever speak this way; I came off less as a lord and more as a

customer service employee. The mayor and the rest of the villagers gaped at me in disbelief.

“Gah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Ortho cracked up behind me, but I ignored him and waited for Ronda’s response. After a few seconds of blinking, he spoke up again.

“Well, thank you. Allow me to escort you to my home, then.” He turned around, walking into the village proper.

We followed behind him, and the nervous eyes of the villagers followed us. This was going to be a difficult land to manage in more ways than one.

Ronda’s house wasn’t exactly dilapidated, but it was definitely shabby. It looked like someone had lined up some stones, thrown down a wooden floor, put a post on each corner, then slapped on wooden walls and a ceiling. For someone’s home, it was extremely plain and simple. While it would be fine in the rain and wind, an earthquake would level it. Granted, I’d yet to experience a single earthquake in this world.

Inside the modest home was the village mayor, with a middle-aged man and a woman sitting beside him. Esparda, Dee, and I were opposite them.

“There used to be 150 people in this village. Bandits attacked once six months ago and again last month, so now there are only a hundred left.”

“Today was the third time you’ve been attacked? Were they the same bandits as before?”

“No, not at all. The first group only had ten men, so we were fine, but the second group was composed of former mercenaries and adventurers. Only after a full day of fighting did we manage to chase them off. The ones who appeared this time were different.”

“But why would a village like this be attacked so frequently?”

The question caused Ronda to hesitate for the first time, but he soon recovered. “This place is far away from any other towns and villages, never mind cities. And since the lord has just changed, no knights will be coming here

any time soon. Before, Lord Ferdinatto's border knights would be on patrol because we're so close to the Kingdom of Yelenetta's border, but not anymore."

"In other words, because this land now belongs to House Fertio, it's in danger of being destroyed."

I filled in the final bit that Ronda couldn't bring himself to say, and he went quiet. If he had said something, it would have been considered a criticism of the marquis. He might've been able to confide this thought to his fellow villagers, but it wasn't something he could say to me. Granted, a short-tempered noble would have had his head just for hinting at it.

"You have my apologies. Lord Ferdinatto had local officials across the towns, but all of them were pulled out. My father, Lord Fertio, selected lords and governors for the large city centers, but he still doesn't have a complete understanding of the situation with smaller locales," I answered honestly.

Ronda studied me for a moment. "So the marquis left us for last. I suppose all nobles are like this. Compared to the larger villages and cities, smaller communities like ours can't offer much in terms of tax. Which makes us worth little. However—"

Either Ronda had chosen to trust me, or his emotions were overflowing, as he began to express his anger toward the nobles. But I wouldn't lend him my ear. Definitely not.

"We'll save that conversation for another time, sir."

Ronda balked, and the man and woman beside him glared daggers at me. There wasn't much I could do about that.

I looked at each of them in turn before continuing. "I cannot blame you if you have issues with this country, resent it, or even hate it. I know this won't sit well with you, but nothing's going to change regardless of how you feel."

The middle-aged man stood up in anger. "Y-you nobles have a lot of nerve!"

He was likely Ronda's son—the next head of the village. He had a large, sturdy body, and a fire blazed in his eyes. With such a hot-tempered man set to take over, things were looking bleak.

I stared him down and said in a low voice, "Sit, please. I'm talking about the future of this village."

Ronda narrowed his eyes at his son, who begrudgingly sat down. I then brought a hand to my chest.

"The founders of this nation, the Bellrinet royal family, chose to leave gaping holes in the law. It is for this reason that nobles shoulder a great deal of responsibility." Ronda, his son, Esparda, and Dee all gaped at me for making such a blunt statement.

A member of the marquis's house had outwardly criticized the royal family. A normal noble would have never done this. But what did I have to be afraid of at this point? If I was to become the lord of this village on the brink of destruction, I had nothing to fear.

Head held high, I gazed upon my stunned audience.

Chapter 3:

Surprised Adventurers

Ortho

ALL NOBLES WERE THE SAME. DIRTY WHEN IT CAME to money, dirty when it came to women. Nothing but walking wads of arrogance. They all reeked of filth.

I'd gotten requests from nobles before, and none of my "employers" were normal. Maybe they seemed normal in the eyes of their fellow noblemen, but not to me. All the flowery words, all that crap about noble pride—it meant nothing because they always put themselves and their profits first. Citizens and their safety were always left for another day.

The distinction between noble and commoner went far deeper than class. There was just something off about every single member of the nobility I'd met. They looked down on commoners, especially us adventurers. We knew it, and merchants who dealt with these fat cats knew it too.

"Haah. Babysitting a little noble boy, huh?"

When I first got this request, I wasn't exactly motivated. Same went for my party. I was planning on being in Lord Fertio's territory for a while, so I took the job even though I didn't want to.

The day I met the kid, I was in for a real surprise.

"You're Mr. Ortho? My name is Van. Van Nei Fertio. Thank you very much for guarding us."

His polite greeting put me in something of a trance, so I shook his hand like normal. "Oh, uh, yeah. My pleasure."

The boy named Van eyed us with great interest. "You guys seem super strong. Your roughed-up armor is really cool, and your weapons are so massive. Aren't they heavy?"

Not sure what else to do, I launched into an honest—if kind of incoherent—explanation. "Yeah, well, uh... Their weight gives them more attack power, so

it's like this..."

Van bobbed his head over and over, looking at the other members of my party. He wound up asking them all sorts of questions, and their composure totally crumbled. Once the shock wore off, I burst out laughing.

Here I'd been bummed at the prospect of working for another noble, but my charge was actually a pleasant, normal kid. That said, I'd have to tell him to quit it with being so polite, or I'd accidentally end up patting him on the head or something.

With that in mind, I joined my new client for the discussion about our journey.

Two weeks went by in a flash. My image of what a noble was had changed significantly. Or should I say I came to realize that there were noblemen like him out there? We'd only been together for a short time, but I was already fond of Van. I liked him enough that if he ever had trouble as the lord, I'd come give him a hand.

But I still didn't really *know* the kid.

He was to become the lord of a dumpy little village. It was in territory that formerly belonged to another noble—making it pretty much just extra land. Not a single person wanted to deal with it by becoming its lord. Despite having the job pushed on him, Van put his life on the line to fulfill his duties as a noble. To protect the land and its people, he made a choice that might lead to his death. As if that weren't crazy enough, he also valued the lives of his knights, his retired butler, his maid, and even his slave.

Once we said we wouldn't risk our hides for the place, he put forth a plan where nobody would die...except him. It was time to put it into action.

I got into a battle-ready position, muttering, "You're one hell of a weirdo, little man."

My buddy smiled. "Y'know, if you said no to his request before, I was willing to risk it."

"Yeah, he's a big deal. We can't let nobles like him die. If possible, I want him to go and become king."

All my pals expressed similar sentiments, so I smiled and responded in kind with one eye on the village. The elderly butler had already built a defensive wall in a blink; it was about three meters tall and ten meters long, give or take. I couldn't believe the old guy was such a talented mage. People skilled in one of the four elements didn't usually become butlers. He probably had quite the story.

Before I knew it, the arrows my friends shot off flew through the air, along with Pluriel's water spears. Even rocks were part of the assault. This was meant to be a double-layered diversionary tactic, but these attacks alone would be pretty effective.

"Let's do this!" I roared, kicking off the dirt.

My party followed behind me, and the knights on the other side charged as well.

"What the—?! Th-they're comin' from this side too!"

One of the bandits noticed us, but it was too late. The shield in his hand was cheap, so I brought my sword down from above, piercing the material with a slash that opened him up from shoulder to hip.

Amid the fresh blood splatter, my allies elsewhere continued to cut down our foes. I needed to get rid of as many bandits as possible, or else we'd have casualties on our side. The archers on both sides were already prepared to fire, so I had to strike fast.

Thanks to our long-range support, we were eliminating the enemy faster than anticipated.

I scanned the battlefield and saw that the knights were in a similar situation. The middle-aged fellow named Dee was swinging a giant sword around like it was nothing. The way it cut through armor would undoubtedly tip the battle in our favor. Case in point, some of the enemies who noticed Dee's terrifying fighting style turned tail and fled.

"Tch! I ain't dyin' here!"

While I gawked at Dee's combat style, a big guy who'd been positioned at the entrance to the village spun around and ran—straight toward the spot where

our long-range support was stationed.

“Crap! Stop him! Someone stop him!” I yelled, slitting the neck of the bearded bandit in front of me. Nobody was in range to bring him down.

This ain't good!

Because of the defensive wall, none of our people would notice the enemy until it was too late. If it became a close-quarters brawl, their arrows and magic would put them at a disadvantage.

“Damn it! Somebody, look! The enemy's closing in!” Frustrated, I parried a sword swinging down on me.

Unfortunately, none of the arrows or spells coming from the wall were aimed at the guy running their way.

Pluriel

AS I CHANTED A SPELL BEHIND THE WALL, I CAUGHT a glimpse of a large man charging in from the corner of my eye.

Enemy!

The word floated to the top of my mind for an instant, but I had already finished my chant and cast the spell. It would take another ten seconds for me to fire off another round. I wasn't going to make it. The hulking man surged toward us with bloodshot eyes, an axe in one hand.

We're going to die!

Just as the thought crossed my mind, two small figures appeared in front of me.

“Van?!”

I'd gone and blurted out the boy's name without his title. This wasn't the time or place to be thinking about etiquette, yet I couldn't help but fret.

“This way, you heavyweight wrestler!”

Van shouted out some nonsense and ran low to the ground, practically

crawling. He was followed by the slave boy, who imitated his posture, sword in hand.

This was beyond reckless. The man wasn't the kind of opponent two children could take on.

Despite my concern, the two cooperated using their well-developed skills to take him on. They rolled out of the way as his axe came down on them, then crawled between his legs and sliced at the exposed backs of his knees. No member of the nobility fought like this, yet their moves were clearly honed and practiced.

"Ngh?!"

The man was taken by surprise and cried out in pain as he lost his balance and collapsed, giving the slave boy a chance to strike. He used the axe in the ground as a foothold and leapt up, quickly cutting the man's neck. His heavy body crumpled to the ground without a sound, leaving me breathless, but Van had already switched gears.

"The enemy might start to turn their attention to us! Everyone, focus on the front!"

We immediately followed the orders of a child not even ten years old.

Who the hell is this kid?

Holding tight to that question, I focused on the battle at hand.

Once the fight was over, Ortho watched the rest of us clean things up.

"Our job here is done. All that's left is to get the second half of our pay from the butler."

We all looked at him.

"And? What about it?" I asked.

Ortho groaned in discomfort, casting a glance at Van and his entourage. "I guess I'm kinda curious. This might not make us any cash, but what do you guys say to stickin' around for a bit?"

The five members of the other party shook their heads. “Sorry, Ortho,” said one. “We have business with the count next door. This request just happened to be perfect since it was on the way. But, hey, we’ll stop by once we wrap things up over there.”

Ortho forced a smile. “Nah, it’s all good. Thanks for the help, and I’m sure we’ll meet again. That said, it’s already late... How about staying the night?”

“Good point. Then tomorrow morning we’ll be taking the surviving bandits. How’s two silver coins a head sound?”



“Hey now, no carrying or handling fees? What’s up with that? I don’t remember you being so damn nice.”

“Aw, shut up. Next time we meet, you’d better have a good gig for us, got it?”

The two of them laughed and parted ways. Ortho then addressed me and the rest of our party, hoping to get confirmation. “If you guys don’t wanna linger, we can head back. But if you’re up for it, what say we all stick around?”

We exchanged glances.

“For how long?” someone asked. “We have money, but we’re gonna run dry if we don’t take jobs.”

“I was thinking about a month.”

“I’m fine with that. But if it starts to look like we’ll be runnin’ long, I might bail.”

“Of course. And no worries, I don’t plan on hanging around the kid forever.”

“Guess we can hunt some monsters and gather materials. There happens to be a pretty big forest nearby.”

“True. Been a while since we hunted outside of a gig. We might actually be able to make some good money,” Ortho replied, happy that the party was on board with his idea.

I was the last to speak. “That Van, he doesn’t really seem like a noble. Not that he comes across as a regular kid either.”

“Agreed,” Ortho said, nodding deeply. “That’s the number one reason I wanna stick around. A kid his age with guts like that? And he’s a quick thinker. I’m sure some of that has to do with his noble education, but he’s still an odd duck.”

During this conversation, Ortho gazed at Van in the distance. At first glance, the boy had the aura of a high-class nobleman. But the second he opened his mouth, that image fell to pieces. He possessed a relaxed vibe, but he was as polite as a normal child. He showed no signs of looking down on commoners.

And then there were his words.

“I feel like I finally saw that ‘noble determination’ they’re always prattling on about.”

Unsure of how to sum it up, Ortho settled on that descriptor, and the rest of us nodded in agreement.

“Right?”

Once one person said as much, the others followed suit.

“I heard his magical aptitude isn’t even suited for offense.”

“In other words, he was willing to go die for us. A child his age?”

“Goodness, what a strange boy.”

As the others swapped comments on Van in their excitement, I uttered my thoughts in a hushed, humbled tone. “When I was in danger, he saved my life. I have to return the favor,” I whispered, and one of the men who’d seen that incident agreed.

“Right! He didn’t move like no kid! I bet he’s at least as good with a sword as your average knight.”

“But he’s not even ten!”

“Ain’t got nothing to do with it.”

The discussion heated up.

“What a mysterious child,” someone said.

Ortho folded his arms. “He is. But he’s more likable than any noble I’ve ever met.”

“Damn straight. If that kid ever became the lord of a huge territory, I’d love to see what kinda place it’d turn into.”

Ortho smiled in response. “Right you are. So, how about it? What say we give the kid some help for a bit?”

The four of us responded immediately.

“I’m game.”

“No objections here.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Now that’s a good plan.”

Ortho looked proudly at us and smiled. “Thanks, guys.”

Something had been on my mind for a time, but I was too busy mopping up in the aftermath of the battle to ask. I told my party I had something to deal with while they moved the corpses and restrained the prisoners, then ran off to where Van was. He was in the middle of talking about something with his maid and slave.

“Lord Van, next time I’ll risk my life first, then Khamsin. Okay?”

“Yup, sure. Uh-huh.”

“You’re not listening, are you? Lord Van, please!”

“Er, okay, I get it. C’mon, don’t cry.” Van grew flustered as he tried to console the girl.

Meanwhile, the slave boy stared sullenly at his own hands. “I need to become stronger,” he whispered, clearly unsatisfied with his current self.

He was still only a child, but due to the influence of his master, it seemed like he was living on the edge. These kids wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice themselves for Van.

“Excuse me, do you have a moment?” I said, causing the three of them to look at me. The maid hurriedly turned her face away. As she wiped her tears, I smiled at Van. “You’re so young, yet you’re already making the girls cry, huh?”

That was my attempt at a joke. Van gave a conflicted smile and shrugged.

“I make it a point to try and be sincere to the women around me. Especially the ones who matter most.”

Hardly the words you’d expect from a child. The maid’s face went bright red, so she clapped both hands over it. Even her ears were red, so there was no hiding her embarrassment.

Meeting Van’s gaze, I asked, “Lord Van, are you actually an elf? There are

times when you don't look like a child at all."

This kind of question would normally be rude to ask a human noble, but Van didn't seem to mind at all. His smile widened. "Till has been taking care of me since I was a baby, so I think I'm most definitely a human."

I nodded. "Where did you learn how to swing a sword?"

Again, I'd neglected to use a title with him, and again, he didn't seem to care. He sighed, lips turning down in a grimace.

"See that old knight over there? His name is Dee, and even compared to his peers he's a super strong fighter. He trained me personally. Even though I'm not getting much bigger, he's been training me, saying he's gonna make me stronger than him. He's a real demon, you know?" Though he was openly complaining, it wasn't long before his smile returned. He clearly thought highly of the man he was talking about.

"Then I take it your knowledge and attitude come from that butler, Esparda?"

"Yeah. But, well, Till definitely had an influence on me too," he answered, tilting his head to one side. I could see in his eyes that he was wondering why I was asking so many questions.

I stood tall and dipped my head respectfully. "My life was saved thanks to your quick actions and sword skills. Thank you so much. I will never forget what you did for me."

When I looked back up, Van was grinning. "It's all good. Forget about it!"

My eyes flew wide. If this was noble charisma, it was powerful stuff. Why, it had already grabbed hold of this poor adventurer's heart.

Chapter 4:

Reform

Van

I SENSED PEOPLE AROUND THE MAYOR'S HOUSE, BUT I paid them no mind and kept talking. It didn't matter if the villagers heard this.

Invigorated by my own speech, I went on, "Complaining about this country's laws or the state of affairs won't change anything. Then in that case, what do you think we should do?"

I made sure to use "we" to express that I was now one of them. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to land with Ronda and the others.

"What would you recommend we do? Get protection from another country?"

I shook my head. "Nope. The Kingdom of Yelenetta functions the same exact way, so we'll be handled the same way. We have three countermeasures available to us."

For the first time, the woman sitting beside Ronda piped up. "A total of three?"

Nodding, I raised one finger at a time as I listed each option. "The first countermeasure is to make this village so valuable that the government can no longer ignore it. The second is to periodically save money and hire mercenaries. The third is to develop the village ourselves."

"None of these seem to be quick solutions," the woman said, disappointed. Anyone who'd lived there for dozens of years must've already considered these options.

One big problem was that transportation issues prevented any of the village's lumber or stone from being exported. The villagers themselves had no way of learning new and updated production techniques, so they couldn't manufacture goods to sell either. No way of earning a profit meant they had no way of reforming the village. That about summed things up.

Yet we were here.

“I’m sure it’s been difficult. But I’m here now, and I’ve studied long and hard so I can protect this territory. I’m going to give everything I have to defend this place and develop it.”

The trio’s response to that was less enthusiastic than I’d hoped.

Esparda, who had been silent until now, took the opportunity to speak. “Pardon my interruption. I am Esparda, and until just recently I worked as House Fertio’s head butler. Lord Van is a genius who was charged with being the lord of this land at the tender age of eight. He has been deemed a prodigy ever since he was a toddler. Not to be presumptuous, but the Chivalric Order’s Deputy Commander Dee and I have come here in his employ. We ask that you trust us in these matters.”

At the mention of his name, Dee thumped his muscled chest with a fist.

The shock that crashed over Ronda and the others as they gaped at my attendants was clearly the good kind.

“The head butler and the deputy commander? The marquis sent such authorities here?!”

“Am I dreaming...?”

They seemed to have forgotten that the fourth son was also here, but nobody looked at me. Annoying as it was, it made enough sense. Who would be okay with leaving things to an eight-year-old? I had to admit, though—I was *not* enjoying being treated like a kid.

While I thought about that, Ronda’s son turned to me with a smile. “Is that so? Well then, the marquis is trying to save us! That must mean you wield one of the four elements, Lord Van!”

“Ah, actually, I use production magic, so don’t look at me for help in combat.”

I made sure to say it upfront so there were no misunderstandings, even if it very obviously bummed everyone out.

Zip it, man. It’s not like this was my choice! You guys are gonna make me sad.

I folded my arms, frowning. “Anyway, we need to start by building a wall that

can protect this village. That wood fencing of yours seems tough, but if the enemy had shot flaming arrows at us, we'd have been done for. Same with the housing."

Everyone's gazes landed on me.

"Can your earth magic be activated indefinitely?" I asked Esparda.

"It remains sturdy while active, but it just becomes clumps of dirt once it loses magic power."

"I see, I see. In that case, let's use it to make walls of earth. If we pack the surface with all kinds of rocks, it will make for a proper emergency measure. Eventually, we can upgrade to a sturdier city wall, but that should be fine for now. Also, I would love to make a moat to slow down attacks."

"Leave that to us," said Dee. "We're used to that sort of thing from hunting monsters. We can also make pitfalls and traps and such. What else? Oh, we should outfit the top of the wall for a counteroffensive."

"Then let's prepare bows and arrows. Those would be difficult for amateurs to use, so let's get some throwing stones as well. And some big shields so nobody gets hurt."

My people and I continued the conversation on our own, with Ronda and the others watching in bewilderment.

After that, I went out to address the entire village. Ortho and his crew stayed near the carriage. *Right, right. It's getting dark, so they're going to stay the night before going home.* I made a mental note to speak to them later.

Ronda and the others called out to the villagers, who soon gathered around. There weren't many elderly people here, maybe 10 percent of the population. Middle-aged men and women made up 30 percent of the group, young men and women 40 percent, and children 20 percent, give or take. The villagers lined up in an unorganized fashion, then sat down according to Ronda's instructions.

Once I'd made sure everyone was seated, it was go time.

"I am Van Nei Fertio. Lord Fertio has appointed me to govern this village. I plan on doing my best to develop this place, so I hope for your assistance."

My brief words were met with applause. *Thank you, thank you very much.*

“As you can see, I am a child, but among those who accompanied me here are one very wise man and a first-class knight officer. If bandits come at us again, let’s work together to fight them off! Together, we’ll make this a strong, bountiful village!”

The end bit there made me sound like a politician, but I wondered if my passion came through. I looked at the villagers to check their responses.

One of the young men raised his hand.

“Yes, you there.”

The man frowned. “What’s gonna happen with taxes? Up until now, it’s been 30 percent of our harvest...”

“And what did that consist of?”

“Ten small monster hides, fangs, and bones, give or take.”

He looked deeply concerned, so I offered a gentle nod. “Then this time around, let’s go with half of that. If they say it’s not enough, then I’ll pay out of pocket to cover the rest. Right now, it’s more important that we do what we can to keep this village alive.”

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the crowd. There were some towns out there that sold children to get by. No doubt they were shocked by how easily I said I’d halve their taxes.

A middle-aged woman spoke next. “Can’t we get the knights to come?”

“It would take two weeks by horse to call for them, followed by another week to check where we are on the priority list. Then another two to three weeks for the knights to arrive here. They would never make it in time, and it would only be a temporary solution. We’re probably nowhere near the top of their list, so they’d probably cast us aside and avoid coming at all.”

That raised the villagers’ hackles.

“Cast us aside?!”

“Just because we’re commoners...”

I dipped my head at their discontent. “I understand your anger, but the reality is that there aren’t enough knights or funds to go around this huge territory. If knights came out here to deal with the bandits, it wouldn’t be in a small group. We’d be looking at one or two hundred troops. They would all need food, horses, armor, and weapons, which means money. If we were to hire mercenaries instead, that would cost even more. On top of that, petitions for the help of the knights come in every week, basically.”

In other words, sorry, we don’t have enough money or manpower.

My delivery made the state of things relatively straightforward, so the crowd went quiet. But it wouldn’t be good to let everyone just simmer in negativity, so I turned to Esparda.

“Esparda, could you make an earthen wall behind the wood fence?”

He nodded and raised his left palm toward the fence. A few seconds of chanting later, his magic activated. Just as it had when we fought the bandits, a sturdy wall materialized from the ground.

Looking at the stunned villagers, I smiled.

“We need your help! With your cooperation, we can transform this village into something stronger than ever before!”

That night, we camped out and bunked in our carriages, since we had no house in the village. Ronda tried to offer us his house, but there was no way we could chase an old man out of his home. We set up camp in the center of the village, which was kept clear for gatherings. We even had a campfire.

Staring at the crackling flames, I found myself getting sentimental.

If only I had aptitude in one of the four elements, I could have chased off the bandits.

Fire was the most powerful and useful on the battlefield, not to mention the flashiest. A fire mage appearing in battle was enough to lift up morale in most cases, but there was no point crying over what I didn’t have. I decided to spend some time coming up with a village defense plan.

“Just protecting ourselves isn’t enough. The best-case scenario would be if we could attack while they couldn’t.”

“Normally that would be striking with arrows and magic from atop a wall.”

“Wouldn’t mean much if the wall was low.”

“Up until now, we’ve been sticking our spears through the openings in the fence, but...”

“Then the enemy could do the same. You’d get stabbed.”

Dee, Esparda, and Ronda shared their opinions, but they were all exceedingly ordinary.

“Should we make a catapult?”

I offered up my own suggestion, and the three of them gawked at me.

“A c-catapult?”

“I’ve never seen one before. What are they?”

“Catapults are used for sieges, Lord Van. In other words, not to protect locations like this.”

None of them seemed particularly game. Dee explained catapults’ function and power to Ronda, as well as why they couldn’t be used when you’re holing up.

“They fire large stones, but loading takes time and it’s difficult to predict where the stones will land. That’s why they’re typically used to destroy inanimate objects, like walls or scout towers,” Dee said, prompting me to furrow my brow.

“It’s not like there’s only one way to use a catapult,” I argued. “If you packed a box full of small stones and sent them flying, they’d have a wider attack range. Plus, if we set one in the back of the village and aimed it at the entrance, we could make them land at the front of the village. Oh, we could also send bottles of oil and torches flying, lighting the ground on fire when they land.”

That terrified the trio.

“Also, maybe something like a large repeating crossbow? We could attach a

shield to the front, and if we placed it near the wall, it'd be a huge threat."

"And who exactly would make that?" Esparda asked with narrowed eyes.

I pointed at myself. "Me."

Silence washed over us.

Do they really think I can't do it?

While the others were focused on strengthening the walls or building traps, I took Till and Khamsin with me to the forest behind the village to gather lumber. Ortho walked up beside me.

"You know, you guys are done. You can head home now," I told him, but he smiled and waved it off.

"Things are starting to get interesting around here, so we're gonna stick around for a bit and do some monster hunting for cash." Right then, Ortho stopped in his tracks, eyes flicking to the woods. "Getting some good vibes here."

"Monsters?"

"Yeah. I can feel 'em, so I'll be off. I recommend cutting down trees in this area, Lord Van."

Ortho's aura changed entirely as he entered the woods, followed by his four party members. The other group of adventurers had already gone home, so it was only Ortho, Pluriel, and the others—a total of five adventurers.

I sensed them fighting from afar. When we were traveling in the carriage, I'd observed that Ortho detected enemies in an almost instinctual way, defeating them before they even reached us. He was an incredibly skilled adventurer, yet apparently he couldn't rank up. What a waste.

I started looking for some good trees while Khamsin placed the palm of his hand against a massive one and looked up at it.

"Lord Van, this tree is incredible!"

"It's also way too big. We could never cut down something like that."

"What about this one?"

“Too thick.”

Khamsin kept pointing out trees over two meters in diameter. I pasted on a smile and picked up some branches off the ground.

During the course of our journey, I had practiced production magic. I wasn't sure if my magic capacity was great or small, but if I focused, I could turn lumber, stone, or metal into any form I wanted. That being said, if I didn't properly picture the outcome when I poured magic into the materials, those bits would come out incomplete or weak. It wasn't exactly easy to use, but I'd eventually discovered that I could make things with extreme precision if I channeled magic into material while envisioning every single detail.

And so I decided to make a wood block by pouring magic into the branch. I could feel the depths of my stomach growing warm, and once the magic reached my fingertips, I gripped the branch and focused. I felt the wood changing form in my hand.

I tried to imagine the end result in as much detail as possible. I pictured each and every fiber.

If possible, I'd love to strengthen those fibers and braid them into rope, but... Oh, that is actually possible. Heck, I can picture them in greater detail, pull apart the fibers, and then braid them.

I experimented with the lumber, creating block after block. The end product felt more like plastic, but being able to manufacture these was great; I piled up as many as I could. Ultimately, I had no clue how much magic I was using to do this, but I was starting to come around on production magic.

“This is amazing, Lord Van! These are so tough that you'd never guess they used to be part of a tree.”

“You could make armor from these. Or even swords, if you sharpened them!”

Till and Khamsin were happily smacking and lifting up the blocks. The only problem was that they were incredibly vulnerable to fire, since they were all made of wood.

Also, I had plans for these materials.

As I climbed into the carriage now stuffed with wood blocks, I heard someone cry out, “Whoa! What the hell?!”

Ortho and his party had returned.

“Weren’t you guys gonna collect wood?” Pluriel asked, tilting her head as she sized up the blocks.

The rest of the party seemed just as puzzled. “What are these? Monster materials?”

“Fiber blocks made out of wood, probably,” Ortho guessed. “Y’know, like nanofibers or whatever?”

“I actually don’t know,” I said offhandedly.

Ortho grabbed a wood block. “Whoa, this stuff is harder than I thought. Hey, could I try cutting one of these?”

“Be my guest.” I was rather curious myself.

He tossed the block into the air and drew his sword. His blade *whooshed* as it swung down, followed by a loud scraping sound. The block hurtled straight into the giant tree Khamsin had touched earlier, splintered it, then plopped down on the ground unscathed.

“Wow, it didn’t get cut!” I happily applauded, prompting Till and Khamsin to do the same. “That’s amazing. Those blocks are really tough.”

I was beaming, but Ortho gaped at me as if he’d seen a ghost. “I went at that thing like I was trying to cleave a stone in two.”

“Er, maybe I’m forgetting, but which is stronger? Stones or trees?” I asked with a confused head tilt while Till and Khamsin racked their brains.

“Stone, buddy. Hell, I can cut stone, but this... Man, what?”

I brushed off Ortho’s bewilderment with a grin. “Anyhow, we got our lumber. All’s well that ends well, no?”

Magic was more useful than I thought. The moment that finally clicked for me, my mind was abuzz with ideas of what I could create.

Crazy decorative swords, maybe even a gun... All guys are itching to make cool weapons, right?

“Aren’t you running out of magic power, Lord Van?”

Till’s question jolted me back to reality. My hands were overflowing with swords, spears, and gunlike objects—all just big enough for a doll to hold.

“These are so detailed!” Till said.

“You could sell them for a lot of money!” Khamsin added.

Their eyes sparkled as they looked at my creations. Even though the tiny weapons were made of wood and had the color to match, their texture was closer to plastic. They looked highly realistic.

“Magic power, huh? How much do people normally have?” I mused, envisioning a blade over a meter long.

As sharp as possible for something that’s not metal, with a slight curve... Something like a katana...

“Wow!”

Once the blade was done, Khamsin was giddy as a little boy. Well, he *was* a little boy.

“Here, it’s yours.”

When I handed it to him, he looked so happy he might die on the spot. He gripped it in both hands with a grin, saying he’d treat it like a family heirloom.

Meanwhile, Till gazed expectantly at me. We had a little stare-off until I finally relented. I took a wood block, whipped up a mental image, and channeled my magic.

“Done. Here you go.”

I handed her my fresh creation, but her face was a collage of joy and disappointment. It was quite the complex expression.

“Um...thank you.”

“What’s wrong? Not a fan of axes? I tried making a super-strong one... If you thrust with it, it can stab like a spear. If you use the other side, it can even be a

hammer. It's one of the most powerful weapons out there..."

I trailed off with tears in my eyes, sending her into such a fluster that even I felt bad for her.

"No, no, that's not it at all! I-I actually love axes! It was just, uh, so incredible that I couldn't help but stare!" Till said, happily rubbing the axe against her cheek.

A smile rose to my face, and I nodded. "Cool! I'm glad you like it."

"I really do!"

Till was truly worthy of praise. Feeling guilty, I whipped up a cute accessory for her later on. Out of wood, of course.

Eventually, we returned to the village, where a large wall was already coming together at the entrance. The actual gate had been untouched, but a four-meter-tall wall stretched out on either side.

"Incredible. This much in only half a day?" I murmured as I stepped out of the carriage.



Ortho folded his arms, eyeing the structure with wonder. “You’re something else, Lord Van. But that butler of yours is a weirdo too. He’s gotta be quite skilled to be dishing out magic like that left and right.”

While I got the feeling that Ortho was essentially insulting us, it made me happy that he saw me on the same level as Esparda. Especially since the people around me said I had no magical talent.

“Esparda is one heck of a butler. He supported our house from the shadows for years,” I boasted.

Pluriel shot me a deadpan stare. “That’s *also* weird. A mage of his talents would normally get forced into the military. If he were an adventurer, he’d be in the top ranks.”

“Huh. Well, none of that really matters. Esparda went so far as to retire so he could come here with me, and I’m beyond grateful. I value the future over the past, so I want Esparda to have fun now that he’s retired.” Proud as I was, I had to nip their attempts at dredging up his past in the bud.

“My joy comes from watching you grow, Lord Van.”

I spun around to see a smiling Esparda...and his hands were full of study materials.

“Uh, today? Really? W-wait a sec. Shouldn’t we prioritize strengthening the village’s defenses? If we don’t work on the gate, then this nice new wall will be for nothing!”

“If we were attacked today, I could close the gate with a wall. Now then, there’s no running from me this time. Come.”

With that, he snatched my hand and dragged me away. Esparda’s inability to take no for an answer was what set him apart from Dee. I slumped in defeat and let fate take its course.

While I was studying, Ortho and his adventurers noticed Till and Khamsin’s weapons and lost their minds. Talk about a difference in enthusiasm.

After dinner, I studied for about two hours before I was freed. It was a stroke

of luck, seeing as the sessions usually lasted half a day or more, but we didn't have much time. Now that it had gotten dark, Esparda was probably trying to conserve precious fuel for our oil lamps.

"La di daaa, la la laaa..."

I hummed to myself while taking a stroll through the village with Till and Khamsin in tow. Almost everyone was asleep, so it was rather quiet.

"That you, young lord?" Kusala, one of the adventurers on night patrol, called out to me. "Where are you off to?"

"Good evening! I'm off to strengthen the defensive wall and doors a little."

"Uh, right now? That's way too dangerous! I'll come with you."

Plump though he was, Kusala was in charge of scouting and removing traps. The meat-loving adventurer easily got carried away, but he was surprisingly considerate.

"Got enough torches? Strengthening doors ain't gonna be simple at all," he said with a carefree smile. There wasn't a dash of ill intent in his words or tone.

"Well, I'm a production mage."

As soon as I said that, Kusala blinked rapidly. "You sure you're good with telling me that? Ain't it a secret?"

"Nah, everyone knows at this point. Plus, you saw those wood blocks and Till and Khamsin's weapons, right?" I grinned.

"Oh, those? I gotta say, your attendants really love you. When I suggested they try their weapons out for a slice and dice, they said they didn't want to break or sully 'em." His cheery smile never left his face as he spoke. "I doubt those things would break very easily, but hey."

Till and Khamsin gripped their weapons, pointedly averting their gazes.

I frowned. "They're weapons, so you probably should test them out. It'd be awful if they turned out to be useless when the time comes."

The pair looked like the world had ended, staring down at their respective weapons.

“It’s just...”

“Yes, but...”

As they hesitated, Kusala chuckled and proudly thrust out his leather shield. “This should be fine, no? I call it Shield of the Orc Knight ’cause it’s made from an orc knight’s back and shoulder hide. It’s pretty firm, and damn flexible.”

Khamsin reluctantly took a stance while looking at the blue shield.

“Haaah!”

He hyped himself up with a battle cry and lightly brought the blade down onto the shield. He was clearly taking care not to damage the blade, as the downward swing was less than aggressive. Kusala’s smile went taut, but against all odds, the blade sunk into the shield and passed right through it.

“Hrm?”

He tilted his head as a third of the shield slipped to the ground and rolled away.

I also cocked my head to the side. “Huh?”

Khamsin held up his sword, eyes wide as saucers. “What the...?”

A question mark might as well have appeared above Till’s head as she gawked at her axe.

“M-my Shield of the Orc Knight is...?! I just bought it and everything!”

Kusala’s pained cries echoed throughout the quiet, sleepy village.

While Kusala tearfully tried to stick the two chunks of his shield back together, I plucked Khamsin’s sword from his hands. When I held my torch close to the blade, it gave off a brilliant shine unlike any sort of wood.

Curious, I stood next to Kusala and touched his shield. “Hold this together for me real quick?”

“Huh?” Kusala muttered, perplexed.

I was going to use my production magic to fix his shield. I bonded and fused

the two pieces, making it so they would be even stronger than before. After Kusala watched his shield once again meld into its original shape, he flashed a brilliant smile and hoisted it into the air.

“Whoa! It’s fixed! Oh, man... My shield is all better! You fixed my Shield of the Orc Knight?! Yahoo!” Thrilled, he jumped for joy.

I nodded to him and turned my attention to Till. “Try cutting his shield. Just a corner is fine.”

“What?! But he seems absurdly happy...”

“No worries. I’ll fix it after.”

Till wound up and swung the axe, muttering, “I-I hope this is all right...”

Because it was made from wood, the axe was fairly light. The blade whizzed past Kusala’s line of sight.

“Huh?”

A question mark appeared above his head as part of his shield fell to the ground again.

“Whoa, awesome! How did it feel?” I asked.

Till simply blinked and showed me her weapon. “I didn’t feel anything. At most, it was like I brushed up against a thread with a stick.”

“Man, that’s incredible. It’ll probably lose its edge if it’s not sharpened. It is made of wood, after all.”

While we talked, a palpable wave of emotion crashed over me from behind, so I turned around.

“M-my shield! My shield just went swoosh?!”

Poor Kusala was grieving yet again over his shield, prompting Till and Khamsin to shoot me reproachful looks.

“Hey, no worries. I’ll fix it! That was the plan from the start.”

Feeling somewhat ashamed, I grabbed the two chunks of his shield. His sad puppy-dog eyes wounded me.

“I’ll make it even tougher than it was before,” I said, powering up the shield as much as I could.

Kusala lit up at last. “Huzzah! My Shield of the Orc Knight made from back-and-shoulder hide has returned to me!” he cried, elated. I nodded to myself, feeling proud.

And he lived happily ever after.

“Hey, what’s going on over here?”

Kusala’s shouts of jubilation had awoken Ortho, Pluriel, and Dee. I spotted other villagers poking their heads from their houses as well.

“Oh, is that Lord Van?” Pluriel asked.

“Who is causing such a ruckus?” Dee muttered. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry for waking you up,” I said, drawing the deputy commander’s eye.

He glanced at each of us in turn, then waved it off. “No, no, it’s fine. I was just wondering what you were up to out here in the middle of the night.”

Khamsin stepped up to him, holding his sword. “Sir Dee, please look at this!”

Dee took it and inspected the blade. “Uh-huh... This is quite the fascinating shape. But given how lightweight it is, would it not break upon making contact with a shield or armor?” He seemed quite enraptured with the sword as he looked it over from top to bottom.

“Lord Van made it,” Khamsin said.

Surprised, Dee smiled so wide his eyes crinkled. “Is that so?! My word! I have never seen such a magnificent curved sword before. If you craft one out of metal, it will make a fine piece of equipment. Well done, my lord!” He looked like a grandfather praising a handicraft his grandson made at summer camp.

Khamsin, on the other hand, wore a deep frown. “This weapon is a cut above the rest,” he said, seething.

Dee gave a pained smile and nodded. “Right, of course. After all, this *is* Lord Van’s work. It must be a truly phenomenal weapon.”

It was clear as day that Dee was only trying to appease Khamsin, but the boy

was bobbing his head in satisfaction.

“What are you doing, messing around so late at night?” Pluriel asked us, annoyed. “It’s time to go to bed.”

Ortho rounded on her immediately. “Pluriel, you idiot! Show some respect!”

Perhaps Pluriel just had low blood pressure and was quick to grouse. It didn’t bother me in the least, so I made sure to apologize again. “I’m really sorry for waking you. I had some free time, so I thought I’d strengthen the village’s defenses. It wound up getting noisy for other reasons.”

The group eyed me curiously.

“But you have no light.”

“How would you strengthen the defenses, Lord Van?”

“Ah, are you going to stack stones?”

The questions came from all over.

Are they teasing me? Even I’m capable of getting upset, you know.

“I came here to see what I could do.” Peeved, I made for the front gate.

“Ah, you see, we are all quite moved by your determination! Truly! It’s just that there really isn’t anything you can do much about, Lord Van...”

I let Dee babble away behind me as I stood in front of the dilapidated gate. It was made of logs joined together, and it seemed tough. I placed a hand on the surface, giving it a once-over. Since the gate was made of wood, I figured I could alter it the same way I’d made the wood blocks.

That said, Dee had mentioned something about the weapons being “lightweight” earlier, and I couldn’t shake it. I hadn’t given it much consideration, but swords, spears, axes, and other melee weapons used weight to increase their attack power. A light weapon was fine if you were aiming for an opponent’s neck or other vitals, but normally you had to consider the ideal weight for a weapon to be effective.

So what about doors and gates? A house door wasn’t much to consider, but this one was meant to keep out intruders. It was all we had for the moment, but

I planned to build thick metal double doors here in the future. While it was possible that creating metal objects required more magical energy, I could gradually make the changes I wanted.

With that in mind, I began to shape the gate as if it were made of clay. If I fused the logs together with magic, they'd become far tougher than a single piece of wood.

"Lord Van? What in the world are you doing?"

I was still miffed at Dee, so I didn't answer him.

"...There we go. Done."

Now in front of me was a lavish set of doors far bigger than the gate had been. I'd adorned it with our house crest, so it brandished a behemoth. The hinge had a cover, and the handle would require multiple people to open and close. I went with a bar lock for extra security—also made of wood, but rather small, so I made a note to bring some wooden blocks to reinforce it later.

Thinking about all this, I turned around only to find my audience gawking at me. Till and Khamsin smiled proudly at the sight of their reactions.

"Let's see, who would be a good pick? Let's go with you, Ortho. Try hacking at this door. I can fix it, so go all out."

I stepped away from the doors as Ortho hesitantly drew his sword, glancing at me.

"You sure about this?"

"We need to make sure this thing can hold up against attacks. Give it all you've got."

"All right."

Ortho dropped into a fighting stance, a low crouch with his legs spread wide. Letting out a roar, he brought down his sword in a magnificent swing. Any ordinary log would've been split in two—but the second his blade collided with the door, it was repelled with a metallic screech. The harsh sound had us clapping our hands over our ears.

Once it was over, I walked past the astonished adventurer and approached

the door. There was a small nick in one corner.

“Argh, it’s damaged.” I sighed. “I guess wood isn’t good enough.”

Right then, everyone who’d been frozen in shock rushed toward the door.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“Wh-what the hell?! A wooden door repelled Ortho’s blade?!”

“Is this seriously made of wood?!”

“How, Lord Van?! What did—I mean, how’d you...?!”

I’d officially sent them all into a panic.

Chapter 5:

Home Construction

WITH THE MORNING LIGHT POURING IN, I BREATHED in the crisp air and slowly opened my eyes. As I stirred, our carriage made a gentle creaking noise. Though beams of light were filtering through the windows, the sun hadn't finished rising. The rich blue, purple, and orange hues were too bright for me.

"Oh! Good morning, my lord."

Till had woken up before me to tidy the carriage. I sat up to greet her.

"G'morning, Till."

I looked out the window of the carriage and saw Khamsin cleaning the ground around it. He glanced over at me.

"Morning, Lord Van."

"G'morning, Khamsin."

Exchanging greetings with my people, I idly thought about how pointless it was to clean the ground. When I got a better look, however, I realized what a fool I was. The area around the carriage was spotless, like a well-maintained sports field.

"Nice job on the cleaning, guys."

The pair smiled bashfully at my praise.

I got out of the carriage and stretched my limbs a bit. I changed clothes, but I hadn't bathed, so I felt pretty gross. Also, the carriage was spacious but had no real bed setup, so my body ached.

Crap, I should've upgraded the carriage! I totally forgot. Oh well.

Nevertheless, I was sick of sleeping in cramped spaces. I needed to prioritize food, clothing, and shelter before I worked on the village's defenses.

"I'm gonna make a house," I said to myself, strengthening my resolve.

I'd camped out and slept in carriages far too long for my liking—even *after* we'd arrived here at the village.

Aren't I supposed to be a noble?

Here I'd begun to fancy myself an adventurer after all the days on the road. I silently cursed my father, then smacked my cheeks with both hands. I was ready and raring to go.

"Khamsin! Bring me the wood blocks!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, of course!"

Khamsin ran to me with a bunch of blocks in hand. He was like a faithful puppy, and his dependability put me at ease. Next, Till came running over with some blocks too. In the blink of an eye, there was a huge heap piled up in front of me.

"Er, wh-what's going on here?"

Ronda had popped up beside me without my noticing, and he was staring at the wood blocks in bewilderment. There was no way he knew they were made of wood.

"I was thinking of building our house in this big open area. Oh, would that be okay? Do you guys use this space much?" I asked.

"This is the center of the village, so it only makes sense for you—the lord—to build your manor here. It's the perfect spot." Ronda nodded, giving his blessing, but he sounded a bit gloomy as he added, "Plus, we rarely ever use it as a public square anymore."

Given the financial situation in the village, they likely weren't able to hold any festivals or anything either. In that case, I decided I'd love to hold harvest festivals and carnivals if we got a little breathing room. We'd all have to work hard to make that happen.

I traced my hand along a wood block. *Will I be able to make something as big as a house? If I can make a door, I'll probably be okay.*

The house would need to be big enough for Till, Khamsin, Esparda, and me. I'd make a different house for Dee and his two knights. Channeling my magic, I

crafted four pillars. With the image of my old bedroom in mind, I determined how much space to put between each pillar and hammered them into the ground.

It was at this point that I made a bit of a happy miscalculation. When making a pillar, I imagined an insanely thin thread before staking them deep in the earth. However, if I then widened those pillars after they were already in the ground, they'd *really* engrain themselves there. No matter how much someone pushed or pulled, they wouldn't move.

Next I had to build the floor and walls that would attach to the pillars. Last but not least came the roof. The way the wood blocks stretched out almost like tentacles was kinda gross, but things went faster when I watched them unfold. I had a blueprint in my head, but seeing my idea manifesting made it feel...bigger than I expected.

Once the outer walls and roof were finished, it was time to make the interior walls. I'd used up all of my wood blocks already, but at least the house had taken shape. In terms of shared facilities, there was a dining room and a bathroom. There were two bedrooms, one large and one medium-sized, plus two smaller rooms. If I didn't make them different, Esparda would get mad at me.



Since there were no windows, I made do with sliding doors. I wasn't sure where I'd find sand to make glass in the first place, so I'd make it a point to ask a merchant when one stopped by.

I inspected the newly completed house while Ronda stood rooted to the spot, eyes bulging.

"Maybe this is a bit too big," I muttered.

Esparda, who'd been observing in silence, piped up at that. "No. If anything, it is still too small. That said, it is still the biggest residence in the village. I have never seen this architectural style, but its construction is magnificent." His expression had all its usual composure, but his tone betrayed his inner joy.

Till and Khamsin seemed just as happy.

"Amazing! I can't believe you made a house so quickly!"

"Your magic is far more suited to lordship than any of the four elements!"

When Khamsin said that, Till and Esparda grew solemn.

"My talent is certainly fascinating, but I do think offensive magic would be better for protecting the citizens," I said sadly. "I believe the people would be more at ease if they had such a lord, no?"

"No way!" Till cried, emotions on full display. "I would much prefer to live in your village than Lord Jalpa's!"

Smiling, I dipped my head to her in gratitude for the vote of confidence.

"Perhaps you'd be right if we were at war," Esparda added. "But in times of peace, what the people seek is a lord who can make their lives better. In that sense, I do not believe there are any lords who can view things from the perspective of the people like you can."

"I-I'll follow you anywhere, Lord Van!" Khamsin said.

Before I could tell them it didn't really bother me, Ortho's surprised shout rose from behind us.

"Whoa! What the heck?!"

When I turned to look, I saw Dee, Ortho, and the other adventurers staring at

the house I'd built. They were stunned—understandably so, seeing as it had barely taken me an hour to put up.

"This is my house."

They looked at me expectantly.

"...If you bring me the wood, want me to build you guys some houses?"

My mouth had gone and moved faster than my brain. Immediately after, Dee whirled to his men and started barking instructions.

"Gather the lumber! Use the carriages! Bring everything here by noon!"

"Yes, sir!"

The three knights moved with a sense of urgency I'd never seen before.

What happened to their usual cool, huh?

Ortho, meanwhile, addressed his party. "We're off to the woods, guys. Right this second! I'll do the cutting. You guys use two carriages to bring the lumber back. We're not losing to those knights!"

"Hell no!"

For reasons beyond my comprehension, Ortho was now issuing commands with a terrifying expression, and the adventurers broke into a sprint. I blinked rapidly in confusion at their lightning speed.

Wait, are they planning on living here too? I didn't think they were, so I wasn't going to build them a house. What do they think lords are, anyway?

I crossed my arms and watched the carriages kick up dust as they sped off.

It was then that Ronda and a few villagers sidled up to me. "Erm... I heard you are building houses..."

"What?"

They must've misheard. I cocked my head to one side, but the look in the villagers' eyes told me they were dead serious.

"Rain and wind gets into my house..."

"Our floor has come loose."

“The door to my house is rotted!”

Requests for renovations were coming in hot.

If they have complaints, they should take them up with the house maker or building contractor. Doesn't that make more sense?

I thought it did, but even from my perspective, their homes were in a ghastly state. Back in my old world, the storehouse of some farm would have been more comfortable to live in.

Thus, I had no choice but to say what came next.

“Let me make a priority list based on the condition of the houses. Then I'll build them for you.”

The villagers let out cries of joy.

Some of them joined Esparda in building the defensive wall. At the same time, Dee, his men, and the adventurers gathered lumber, and I took Till and Khamsin to go make some houses.

Wait, wasn't I supposed to be making my own furnishings? How did it come to this?

First, I used the lumber to make wood blocks. As it turned out, transforming lumber into a raw material while also changing its form was quite difficult. It made more sense for my workflow to make the wood blocks and *then* build houses. Once I had the process down pat, I was able to make the things at a pretty fast pace. Logs, broken walls, and even doors became fodder for my wood blocks.

After about an hour, I had enough for a single house.

“All right. First, I'll make a house for Dee and his people since they don't have one. Next will be Ortho and his men, then Fula. After that, Inka...”

While I ran through the plan, I couldn't help feeling like a corporate slave, which got me a bit down in the dumps. But once I started, there was no stopping.

Maybe it'd be a good idea to have Dee's house also function as a kind of base, since he and his men are knights. A training ground isn't in the cards here, but

they could use a storage facility for weapons and armor.

I gave the house a medium-sized room and two smaller ones, as well as a dining room and a bathroom. I also created a lounge area that could be entered directly from outside. I felt good about making the storage space on the larger side, but by the time the house was finished, it ended up being about the same size as mine.

Eh, the storage space meant it was gonna be pretty big. Not much I can do about that.

“Ooh, look, Deputy Commander! It’s done!”

“Say what?!”

Dee and his men had returned right on time. They admired the finished house, eyes aglitter.

“M-my word! This is incredible! I expected nothing less from you, Lord Van!”

“Phew! I was wondering what we were going to do for a moment there... Even during our training, we only ever camped outside for half a year at most,” said one of the knights, just before the other headbutted him to shut him up.

He publicly insulted my territory! That jerk. The housing situation here is at least better than camping outside!

I glared at the first knight—Arb, that clown—who immediately remembered his manners and hollered out an apology. It was fine with me and all, but I wasn’t the one they needed to make it up to.

“Okay, then as an apology to the villagers, go gather more lumber with all you’ve got!”

Arb and Law gave an affirmative shout and immediately ran off.

Dee, who’d been checking out the house, came over to me. “This is something else! I was already blown away by your magic power, but I didn’t think you had the knowledge to construct such a marvelous residence!” He then realized that Arb and Law had vanished. “Hrm, where have my men gotten off to?” He surveyed the area, squinting.

I pointed at the village entrance. “They said they wanted the rest of the

people here to live in nice homes like this and went off to gather wood,” I explained, and Dee’s eyes went round.

“I-Is that so?! They said that?! I can’t believe they’ve grown so much... All right, then I shall join them!”

Moved, Dee made to run off, so I put the brakes on for him. “You only have a single carriage, right? It’ll be too difficult for you to catch up to them now. Stay here and guard the village.”

“Grr... You’re right, we don’t have enough manpower to spread ourselves so thin. Fine, then I shall remain and help with building the wall.”

And just like that, Dee joined the wall construction efforts.

Thanks to Esparda’s powers, it was completed within the day, and I was able to finish the adventurers’ house as well. I kept their place to a fairly standard size, but each of them had their own room, so it was plenty lavish.

I still had room to make more stuff, so I built a simple bathhouse next to my home. Frankly, I just wanted to take a bath—but as soon as the women heard about its completion, they were jumping for joy. The bath heater itself was made of steel. It was a bit of a retro system in which Pluriel used magic to fill it with water, then heated it by lighting a fire beneath the kettle. I tested it out myself, and it was quite cozy. I was just glad to get to cleanse my body in some hot water.

“Let’s get in together, my lord!” Till said.

“I shall join you too!” Pluriel offered.

It was tempting, but I had to turn them down. I was displeased that Khamsin would be bathing with adults at the age of ten, yet I was treated like a child despite being eight. I was a perfectly functioning adult! When I said as much, both Till and Pluriel looked at me like I was a tiny tot, which I found annoying, but they gave in.

I would later come to regret the missed opportunity.

When night came, I entered my new house to go to sleep...only to discover I’d forgotten to make a bed. I almost broke down in tears.

Am I an idiot?

Just when I thought I could rest in a nice big bed of my own, I had to use a sleeping bag again?

I quickly crafted beds for everyone out of the wood blocks I had left. Four for my house, three for Dee's, and five for Ortho's. The villagers shared some of their straw, and with that, the beds were finished.

They were soft, and I was satisfied.

Good night to one and all.

The next day, I woke up in the morning feeling rested and energetic for the first time in a while. My maid had cooked me a wonderful breakfast.

Bwa ha ha ha! I want Till to make me more omelets.

"Absolutely delicious," I told her.

"Thank goodness! We don't have much in the way of ingredients, so I was a little worried," Till said, relieved.

We were sitting in chairs at a dining table—both of which I'd made on the spot and were surprisingly comfortable.

I get to eat a delicious breakfast in my own home and smile with my adorable Till. What else do I need?

Esparda, sitting diagonally across from me, spoke with a grave expression. "The village defenses are important, but we need consistent revenue. At this rate, the only contact with the outside world we'll have is the merchant who may or may not show up once a month."

His somber tone didn't land so well with all the bits of egg stuck in his beard.

Much as I wanted to gripe about how tired I was, I kept my composure. "For now, I can handle houses, furniture, and even clothes on my own. We should be able to gather enough food to keep us afloat too. That's why I was thinking of focusing on defenses."

Esparda wiped his mouth with a white handkerchief, then met my gaze. "We

lack spices. And if we wanted to make your beloved baked goods, we wouldn't have the ingredients to do so."

"Say what?!"

I jerked to my feet. When I looked at Till, she averted her eyes. I'd had no idea that we barely had any spices left.

"Production, huh? All right, let's make something we can sell! Anything works. Someone give me an idea."

Khamsin was the first to raise his hand. "I think your wood blocks would be a great product!"

"Nope. I'm the only one who can make those."

His shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"We could hunt monsters and sell their parts," Till suggested.

"Nope. Ortho and his guys hunt the monsters around here, so the parts belong to them instead of this village."

My maid sagged in her seat.

"Normally, one would specialize in some sort of crop," Esparda said, "but finding something unique to this village would prove difficult. It wouldn't provide any immediate income either."

He hung his head before I could even say anything.

Needless to say, transport distance made exporting lumber a no-go. If we were near a big river, we could send the exports down the water, but that wasn't something we could count on here.

"Hrm. Looks like I'll have to make some moves after all," I relented, and everyone's gazes fell on me.

While I was building homes for the villagers in the morning, Ortho and his merry band approached me.

"I heard you're buying up ore."

The group had brought over a carriage loaded with lumber and tons of ore.

Man, that carriage is way more durable than I thought. That horse looks really mad, though.

“Since these woods are located at the base of the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range, there are a lot of tough monsters around these parts. Which means we can get some rare ore without even climbing the mountains!”

Ortho’s crew lined up in front of me, arms filled with ore.

“This is iron ore, and we’ve also got copper, silver, and a little bit of gold. Oh, and look—mithril!” Ortho was especially excited about the last one. Although it was still in its raw state, the stone had a beautiful bluish-silver color.

“Mithril?! That’s amazing! I can’t believe you found this stuff in the woods.” I was over the moon about it, but something nagged at me. “Why hasn’t anyone ever had the same luck?”

Ortho folded his arms. “Just a guess, but the deep woods are far away and not all that useful. The knights were probably the only ones who searched the area, and knights don’t pay much attention to herbs or ore.”

“I see. In that case, this is an excellent mining location for talented adventurers. If the base of the mountain is that plentiful, then the Wolfsbrook Mountain Range must be filled with resources!”

Esparda, who’d joined us late in the conversation, furrowed his brow quizzically. “How rare. I’ve hardly ever heard of metals and ores being found in the woods. Iron sand is fairly common, but lumps of raw metal are extremely uncommon... As an exception to the rule, the outskirts of dungeons sometimes have stone or iron golems wandering about.”

Ortho and his party exchanged glances.

“Any traces of golems?”

“Nope. If there were any, they would’ve fallen apart ages ago.”

“Any dungeons?”

“No clue. We didn’t exactly investigate, so it’s possible.”

After the party finished talking among themselves, they turned to me with grave faces.

“Listen, Lord Van. If we find a dungeon, that will change things in a big way. Tons of people and products will start to pass through this village.”

My lips tugged up into a smile all on their own. “A dungeon, huh? If we discover a dungeon, the importance of this village will rise dramatically.”

Dungeons were a treasure trove of resources. Newly discovered ones typically had all kinds of riches and relics.

When members of the Adventurers’ Guild located a dungeon, they had to report back to the guild, which then quickly built a new branch in the town or village closest to the dungeon. This happened every single time. That was just how important dungeons were in this world; no nation could ignore them. In fact, most of the weapons referred to as “national treasures” by the countries of this world were objects found in dungeons.

But that also came with its own set of problems.

“Given the state of this village, we wouldn’t be able to take everyone in if we reported the discovery of a dungeon.”

Ortho and his pals seemed puzzled, but Esparda nodded deeply. “Precisely. We would be opening ourselves up to a veritable flood of adventurers, merchants, and knights. This village does not have the facilities, food, or funds to support that level of business.”

“Nearby nations could try to take over and reap the benefits,” I said. “Actually, the one most likely to do that is the count next door...”

Esparda stroked his beard, lapsing into thought.

Ortho looked equally troubled. “In other words, we shouldn’t go searching for this dungeon just yet, eh?”

“We could always go in once and keep it a secret?”

“You idiot! We’d be kicked out of the guild for that.”

While Ortho bickered with one of his underlings, Pluriel crossed her arms and looked my way.

“If we find a dungeon, won’t knights be dispatched here immediately? And with your magic, the housing problem ceases to *be* a problem.”

I gave her a pained smile. “Remember, I was a nuisance back home. If it turns out the place I was sent is actually valuable, I’ll just be exiled elsewhere. I want to make this village a big deal *before* we track down the dungeon.”

Pluriel’s brows lifted in surprise. “I see. Then I suppose there’s nothing we can do about that.” She turned to her party. “Let’s gather resources without running into the dungeon, guys.”

“Oh? Uh, roger that.”

“Gotcha.”

“Understood.”

The adventurers quickly acquiesced to my wishes. For them, finding a new dungeon was a huge accomplishment. As long as they reported it back to the guild, they could dive right in along with the guild investigators. They’d get first dibs on any treasure, and they’d be the first to map the place. It would only make sense for them to send word as soon as possible, but they’d agreed to keep quiet out of consideration for me.

For the nobility and the countries of this world as a whole, dungeon discoveries were of the utmost importance. Normally, it would be my priority to locate the dungeon and report it...but my position complicated things. I had zero worth, and no one expected anything of me in the future. If I reported the existence of a dungeon, one of my older brothers would simply snag the credit for it.

I had to build up this village myself.

Amped up by my newfound resolve, I picked up one of the hunks of iron ore lined up on the ground. I channeled my magic into the ore, feeling its path as it permeated the material. It happened slowly in some areas and immediately in others. By contrast, when I used my magic on trees, I felt the magic crawl through the whole thing at an even rate.

As a test, I focused on the portion my magic had whizzed through and turned it into sand, then separated it from the rest. Much to my surprise, I was left

with a chunk of metal. It was only about a third of its original size, though.

“You already made iron?!” Ortho blurted out, prompting me to look up.

“Normally one would have to melt it down and remove the impurities, so I have no clue how pure this is,” I told him.

Kusala’s eyes glimmered as he pointed at the iron. “C-could you try making me a sword with that? A thin, double-edged sword would be awesome!”

That had the adventurers blinking, wide-eyed.

“Did he always like swords that much?”

“He’s been acting real weird since last night.”

“Maybe since the young lord’s making it, he can sell it for a high price?”

They had no idea that Khamsin and Till’s wooden weapons had insane cutting power.

Kusala flashed the broad smile of someone invulnerable. In fact, he looked kind of evil. At the end of the day, I *did* feel bad about the whole shield issue, so I’d give him a sword to make up for it.

“All right. One gold for a short sword, two for a long one.”

“So cheap! In that case, I’ll take one of each, please and thanks!”

I didn’t expect him to decide that fast. Is he really okay with spending the equivalent of one or two million yen?

As I thought this to myself, Ortho and his buds wore doubtful looks.

“Ain’t that a bit pricey?”

“Indeed. We’re talking iron weapons, right? Those would normally cost between five and eight large silvers.”

They were right. This *was* pricey.

But Kusala’s grin only widened. “Heh heh heh... Don’t come crawling back to me if you regret your words and deeds. Now then, young lord... Here’s your three gold.”

Puzzled as I may have been, I took the coins from one cheerful Kusala,

grabbed the iron ore, and began to make iron. Once I had enough, I started with the short sword.

How do I want to do this?

I personally liked flashy, ornate weapons. I'd make the hilt easy to grip, the guard straight, and the blade double-sided. Then came the decorations and inscription. My teacher had always praised me during art classes, so I was going to put my creative skills to work. I fixated on every little detail in my imagination.

Oh, I should do something with the pommel too.

The blade was thicker than a katana's but as sharp as possible. I figured the density of the metal was important, so I made sure to condense it. Gasps rose up around me, but I ignored them; all of my brainpower was focused on the sword.

"All right."

I finished it pretty quickly. I hadn't cut corners, but it felt just right, so I must've figured out the trick to all this. As proof, there was a single absurdly splendid sword in my hands. It was about sixty centimeters in length and fifteen centimeters wide. And the decorations? Downright awesome.

With a smile, I presented Kusala with his new short sword. "Here you go. Since you're my first-ever customer, I focused really hard on making it look cool."

Kusala took the sword with trembling hands, then held it aloft with a loud roar. "*Hell yeaah!*"

"Yeesh... Creepy."

His howling genuinely put me off, so I slunk away from him and hurried on to his next sword. Just like last time, I started with a clump of iron. I already had the image in my mind: a longer blade, same design as the first. After stretching out the metal like clay, I compressed it in one go. The sword was about a meter long; any longer and it would be hard for Kusala to wield.

I could hear him begging me to show it to him, but I ignored him entirely.

My audience needs to zip it. Lord Van is in the middle of making a super stylish sword!

Silliness aside, I held the image of the sword in my mind and distributed my magic equally through the metal. Maybe one day I would find myself whistling some old blacksmith song while I worked.

“...And done. Hey, not bad at all.” I held up the gorgeous, powerful long sword. I’d made the handle close to thirty centimeters long in case he wanted to wield it with both hands. The blade itself was seventy centimeters long, with a straight guard like the first. In terms of thickness, it was fifteen centimeters wide. It had the feel of a powerful but sharp weapon. Given my good grades in the arts, it didn’t surprise me that I’d come up with this.

Deeply satisfied, I handed the long sword to Kusala, who was holding his precious short sword with a backhand grip. He was somehow able to also grasp the long sword with both hands.

“Wahooooo!”

With that peculiar shout, he jumped around in what could only be described as a tribal dance. Thanks to his excitement, a bunch of villagers started to gather around us.

Kusala’s joy was infectious, prompting Ortho and the rest of his party to change their tune.

“L-Lord Van! Can I get a sword too?! A long one?!”

“I want a short sword! Something for thrusting!”

The adventurers were far more energized than they had been a moment ago. Apparently, my work was so good that even real-deal adventurers wanted it.

With a gentle smile, I told them, “Three to five gold apiece. Oh, and a great sword is gonna run you ten.”

“You raised your prices!”

“And so suddenly! What happened?!”

Upping my prices had sent them into a panic. Perhaps I’d gone too far.

Pluriel furrowed her brow, eyeing Kusala's sword as she muttered to herself. "Three gold, huh? That's a little rough on the wallet. There *was* a short sword I wanted you to make, but..."

The cost was too high for her, it seemed—and that wounded me. I was a fool for making this woman sad!

"Fine," I said before I could think better of it. "For you, I'll craft it for one gold. But just this once, okay?"

I tried to act all tough by turning away from her, but she just blinked at me in shock.

"A-are you sure? Really?"

"Like I said, just this once."

Pluriel beamed brightly.

Ortho overheard us and stepped closer. "You serious?! Only one gold this time?!"

"For you, it's three. A long sword'll run you five and a great sword, seven."

"Are you crazy?! Only the great sword is cheaper!"

Man, he's so loud. I just want him to cough up the money already.

"You're good with a great sword, then?" I asked, smiling wide. "I'll go ahead and get started."

Flustered, Ortho waved his hands wildly. "H-hold your horses! Fine! I-I'll take a long sword! A long sword!"

"That'll be five gold."

"Agh..." After making a scene, Ortho tearfully handed me five gold.

He had the money on him? That's kind of amazing.

In my mind, he'd graduated from "adventurer" to "adventurer who casually carried seven million yen on him." Anyone carrying around that much cash was an adventurer in their own right...heart-stoppingly so.

Thus, I fulfilled orders for Ortho and his party. They paid me a total of twenty

gold, so I opted to handle their furniture for free. Hopefully they'd be grateful.

Wait a sec... I had them pay big-time for their weapons, but they got their house for free!

Maybe I was being a little too soft on them after all.

That night, we completed the outer wall and built a simple moat around the village. However, the group of bandits didn't come the next day—not that there'd been a guarantee they would in the first place.

"I suppose we could prepare some defensive facilities," I said to myself.

Till, standing beside me, gazed around at the village. "Everyone *does* have a house now. But don't you ever run out of magic power, my lord?"

"I get tired like anyone else. And when it hits me, I'm down for the count."

"I feel like you've been making things all day long, though..." She gave me an exasperated look, to which I merely tilted my head.

The villagers had fairly simple houses: two or three with a single bathroom. I might rebuild them if I ever got my hands on lots of stones and such, but for now this was fine. As proof of that, the villagers were super appreciative. Everywhere I walked, people dipped their heads in thanks, presenting me with the fruits of their harvests and whatnot.

Mm, no complaints here, but I prefer money over things.

I'd considered both convenience and protection when building the houses, so I put houses in groups of four and set the village up like a grid. This was actually known as a grid plan. In the center block was the lord's home, with Dee's and the mayor's homes nearby. Ortho's house was near the entrance because the adventurers would be coming and going quite often.

The grounds were full at this point, but I was thinking of expanding the village in the future. All that was left was funding, acquiring materials, and making defensive installations. For now, I'd focus on making weapons, armor, and shields for when the merchant dropped by, but those defensive installations were also key.

I needed workers, but few people were good with their hands in the way I needed. It was all up to me.

For starters, I designed a simple ballista. I used monster hide as a substitute for rubber, made the front resemble a large crossbow, and created a platform for setting large bolts. Wood blocks around the crossbow parts formed a big shield. I wound up with a powerful weapon that had ample protection and could shoot huge, destructive projectiles. I'd also used the principle of leverage to make it as light to pull back on as possible, but even then it was still heavy.

Anyhow, I made eight of these ballistae to be positioned in all directions around the village. It was possible to aim up, down, left, and right, but they couldn't be pivoted toward the village. I set bolts on each of them, so they would be immediately usable if we were attacked.

"Gotta strengthen our defenses a little bit more."

I wasn't going to let my guard down. I tried building watchtowers in each of the four corners of the village. That said, I didn't have enough materials, so they were only two stories tall with ballistae set at the top—pretty simple constructions. They definitely *looked* straight from a fortress, so I was happy with that...even if the scale was a bit small.

As I worked, night fell. Till told me she was going to prepare dinner and went off to swap places with Khamsin.

"Whew! Good work today, Khamsin," I said, but he hung his head. "What's up?"

He opened his dirt-covered hands and let out a sigh. "All I did was stack stones a few meters high. The only thing I'm good for is piling up those rocks. But you, Lord Van... You changed this village."

I could hear the disappointment in his voice. A conflicted smile rose to my lips. "Well, I am the lord. I've gotta make this place better. Tell me, Khamsin—what's your goal?"

Khamsin looked unsure, making me wonder if the question was too complex for a ten-year-old. But then he fixed me with a powerful stare. "My goal is to protect you, Lord Van."

My heart squeezed as though I were a schoolgirl in love!

No, this isn't the time for jokes.

"You don't have to push yourself like crazy, you know? But thank you."

It was a little embarrassing, but I wanted him to know I was grateful.

Khamsin breezed past me and walked ahead, chest puffed out. I couldn't help but smile as I watched him carefully survey our surroundings. Anyone looking at us would surely just see two small kids playing around. But at the end of the day, Khamsin had the kind of determination that put adults to shame. No onlookers would be able to see it.

I made a mental note to craft Khamsin some armor so he could look the part of the proud knight.

Chapter 6: The Bandits

THREE DAYS PASSED, AND I DID A WHOLE LOT OF WORK. I used my production magic to strengthen the entirety of the village's protective wall. Stones had initially been set into the surface, but I fused them together to make them as tough as concrete.

The height was a little inconsistent, so I brought the tallest portion of the wall to an even three meters. It was one and a half meters wide, with all the shielded ballistae set equidistant from one to the next. There was a total of one hundred, to be precise.

If this were a tower defense game, I would've loved to throw in some alternating machine guns and anti-air rockets, but alas. Word had it that researchers in this world were working on gunpowder and some rudimentary firearms; I'd have to ask the merchant about that when the time came.

Also, it had taken three days to get our moat to completely encircle the village. I'd set up a drawbridge with a pulley system leading to the village entrance for people to come and go, and I set a metal plate against the doors to strengthen them further.

"Now I'm satisfied," I said proudly. "There aren't many villages as tough as this one!"

"Of course!" Till said.

"That's right!" Khamsin chimed in.

Esparda and Dee, on the other hand, wrinkled their brows as they groaned in tandem.

"This is no longer a village."

"It's a small fortress. At this point, bandits would stand no chance against us."

And just like that, I got the stamp of approval from both men. Surely I was imagining the exasperation weighing them down.

That was when Dee spoke up, sounding somewhat vexed. “If only Lord Jalpa realized the kind of power you wield... You would have been made the next marquis, or at least an advisor. Think of all the good you could have done.”

Esparda frowned. “You mustn’t speak like that. The marquis only held offensive power in high esteem, and nothing more. It is not our place to judge his way of thinking.”

“But Esparda, just look at all this! Is it not obvious?! Lord Van has more than enough offensive power! Given the time, one could say he has *more* power than any other!”

“His power lies in protection. Just as this base cannot move, Lord Van’s magic is not made for invading other nations. But should another country attack us, his protection would be like a steel wall, keeping the citizens safe.”

“Nonsense! War is not simply the clashing of troops! There are squads for attacking, squads for protecting, and squads that support the rest. All of these groups must be involved for a fighting force to function properly...”

The men’s fierce argument would no doubt rage on for some time. Their harsh tones were beginning to upset Till and Khamsin, so I quickly intervened.

“We don’t have time to waste asking for the things we don’t have, we can only look for the best way to fight with the things we do have,” I said, shamelessly copying that one anime character’s famous line as if it were my own.

The pair stared at me with wide eyes, unmoving. After studying my face for a bit, Dee burst into laughter.

“Gah ha ha ha ha! You are quite right, my lord! Bemoaning our circumstances changes naught! It doesn’t matter if you’ve been exiled to the corner of our territory. You’ll make a comeback! And before long, your territory will—”

“Why are you encouraging him to go down a path that would put him at odds with the marquis?” Esparda asked, composed in his interjection. Even with his deadpan expression, he seemed proud.

That reminds me... The day after a big building session usually features a ton of studying. I’ll have to pretend to be busy tomorrow. Maybe I’ll make weapons.

As I steeled my resolve, I caught Till and Khamsin watching me with sparkling eyes. I couldn't bear to look at them. How could I ever tell them that I'd just lifted a famous line without giving any credit?

Unsure what else to do, I figured I'd go look at the moat. It was basically dry and empty, with a bit of a ramp; we had yet to fill it with water, but that was my vision. Appearances were just as important as function, you see.

There *was* actually a little water in the moat, but it had soaked into the dirt, making it more like mud. As I suspected, I would have to solidify the bottom and sides of the moat for it to work properly.

I also needed a way to draw water. Unfortunately, there were no rivers or lakes nearby. Every now and then, the villagers trekked to a faraway stream to fetch water, but it was never much. They usually used pots to catch rain, which they filtered before using.

"We definitely have to get ourselves a water source. It's our most important lifeline," I muttered on my way to the village entrance.

I opened the front door, only for one of the villagers to burst in from outside. They were frantic—spooked, even.

"Th-the bandits have come! They're heading this way from the road! H-hurry and raise the bridge!" they cried between breaths.

I nodded briskly and swiped a hand through the air. "Raise the bridge and close the doors, now! Do you know how many villagers are still outside?!"

The men immediately did as I'd ordered, raising the bridge and shutting the doors, bar lock and all. The women and children did a head count as they sought cover.

Wow. I've only been here a few days, but they're already listening to me as their lord! Look at them, swift on their feet and acting with purpose!

Silently rejoicing, I confirmed that we were good and closed.

Next, we needed to take our positions. "One person on each of the observation towers! At least five on the defense wall! Ten people at the entrance!"

As I issued commands, I attempted to climb the wall myself, but Till grabbed my hand to stop me.

“Till? I have to get goi—” I turned around, only to see her standing there with tears in her eyes.

She was distressed, that much I knew. How? Well, I’d never seen her like this.

“...Sorry. Dee, could you take your men and check the situation? Once you let me know what’s going on, I can issue commands from the rear.”

Dee thumped his chest as his lips curled into a smile. “Roger that!”

Dee

TO ME, THIS WAS THE KIND OF SIMPLE BANDIT suppression I’d experienced dozens of times. There were times when we had few knights from the Chivalric Order present, and even times when we were attacked while marching. During those battles, bandits had gone so far as to threaten our clients into spilling information so they could come at us with their full might.

But I crushed every single one of their attempts.

I firmly believed our success was thanks to my men’s skills, correct battle formations, and our impeccable tactics. I had full confidence that my orders were perfect—prodigious, perhaps.

Regardless, I wanted to follow Lord Van’s orders in the here and now. That surprised me, as I felt I had better control on the battlefield than even my own superior, the commander of the order.

“No, that’s not it.”

It wasn’t that I wanted to follow Lord Van, per se. He had defied my expectations over and over again, so now I wanted to experience his command for myself.

When I realized this, a grin spread wide on my face. “Ha ha ha! Fascinating! Now then, how will things fall?! I cannot wait to see!”

I laughed to myself while climbing the stairs, glancing at the terrified faces of

the villagers manning the ballistae. I gave the ones hunching over a smack on the back, then looked toward the road. The view was clear, with no obstacles or cover to speak of in such a rural location. The man must have noticed the bandits from far away. He had the potential to be a great scout. Only now was I able to confirm the group of ferocious bandits coming our way.

They had no sense of unity about them, given their slapdash attire. One of them even had his mouth open and was swinging a sword around.

“Hrm? They’re running at us?” I cocked my head to the side.

Just then, Lord Van called out to me from behind. “What’s the situation?”

Chuckling at his calm and measured tone, I reported to him as if I were a foot soldier. “Enemy’s somewhere between fifty and a hundred strong! They’re still several hundred meters away! Strange as it sounds, they’re running at us with all they’ve got! By the time they get here, they’ll probably collapse on the ground in exhaustion!”

Lord Van waited one or two seconds before replying. “Got it! Do you think maybe they’re being chased?”

Hrm, that makes sense. It would explain why they’re sprinting toward us. Have they been discovered by some Chivalric Order patrol or the like?

As I strained my eyes to get a better look, a villager beside me let out a yelp.

“What is it, my good man?”

He pointed behind the bandits. I couldn’t see clearly due to the cloud of dust they were kicking up, but apparently he’d picked up on something.

“A tail! I can see a tail!”

“...A what now?”

The lack of further information left me puzzled. I needed to confirm the situation. Behind the bandits—who were running in scattered lines of five or so—I could only see a cloud of dust. It was nearly impossible to make anything else out, but one by one, the villagers raised their voices in alarm.

Do these humble folk have abnormally good vision?!

“Those are armored lizards!” one shouted.

“And not just one or two!” said another.

I grimaced. This was terrible. The worst possible adversary for this village had shown itself. I spun around and yelled toward Lord Van on the ground.

“A group of armored lizards is chasing the bandits! Your average weapon will have no effect on them!”

The boy’s expression darkened. Of course it would. The only combat-ready mages in this village were Esparda and the lady adventurer. Worse yet, the adventurers were currently out procuring materials.

With the right armor and heavy gear, the Chivalric Order could slow the lizards down and strike at their weak stomachs. But I couldn’t make the villagers attempt that—and even if I did, they would fail.

Even with heavy equipment, I could handle two lizards myself at most. My men could take care of one if they worked together. All we’d be able to do was buy time while the horde of creatures came at us with their claws and tails.

“Everyone, switch ballista projectiles! Load the iron bolts on the side!” Lord Van commanded.

So he’s going to cling to the slimmest possibility of victory and boost the offensive power of the ballistae? Better than doing nothing, but still an impossible gambit.

“No. I vowed to follow Lord Van’s orders. I am free from obstructive thoughts! A knight does as he’s told!” I said to myself.

I made my way toward an unmanned ballista and loaded it with the other villagers. Since we had assumed we’d be fighting bandits, the original bolts were those mysterious, spear-like projectiles our lord had made with his magic. They’d be more than good enough as a show of force against normal humans, but they would likely bounce right off of armored lizards, hence the need to swap them out.

After unloading a wooden bolt from the ballista, I grabbed one of the iron bolts off the ground. It was heavy, but only about as much as a short sword. Its

destructive power was undoubtedly a notch higher, but it wouldn't be nearly as strong as a swing of my blade.

If only we had three more talented swordsmen, or maybe five... Then the six of us could fight with support from the villagers and easily vanquish anywhere between ten and twenty beasts...

I suppressed the urge to grind my teeth as I loaded the iron bolt. I tugged on the wooden piece that pulled back the drawstring. I could hear grinding noises, but the ballista itself was extremely tough. It was made exceedingly well. In fact, it was hard to believe it was made by an eight-year-old child.

Moved by the thought, I set up the loaded ballista and glanced at the road. The bandits were already within earshot.

"Help! S-save us!"

There were fewer than I'd expected, and all out of breath. Forty men, give or take. Now that they were in range, I could fully see the armored lizards in pursuit, and they were *massive*. From snout to tail, they must've been over eight meters long. If we hadn't dug the moat, they would've been able to reach the top of the wall just by standing.

Worse yet, there were something like thirty or forty of these creatures, an unusually large group. A midsize village would struggle with this, never mind us.

"There are forty armored lizards, all eight meters long! If one of their meals trips and falls, they'll slow down to dine. Nothing to fear!"

"By 'meal,' you mean a bandit? Maaan, that's terrible!"

I couldn't help but laugh at Lord Van's out-of-place reaction. "Gah ha ha! My apologies! That was improper of me!"

The villagers gawked at us in disbelief. Though even I considered this to be a bit of a dilemma, we needed to tell jokes and set one another at ease in times like these. Excess tension would be our downfall.

"All right," Lord Van said. "We'll allow the bandits to fall into the moat before we fire. Let's make sure those lizards get as close as possible! Once the enemy pitches into the moat, everyone open fire! Got it?"

“Y-yes, sir!”

“Understood!”

The villagers responded to Lord Van’s orders as they trembled in fear.

They had little to worry about. A good shot to the mouth or the eye would keep the beasts in check. We just needed to buy enough time for the mage adventurer to return, and then I would charge in alongside Arb and Lowe. With Esparda’s help, we could take down one lizard at a time.

“Come on, everyone!” I bellowed, hoping to boost their spirits. “Tonight we’re having lizard steak for dinner!”

One by one, the bandits toppled into the moat with pathetic cries. The villagers looked like they were ready to flee in the face of those terrifying armored lizards, but because the ballistae were locked in place, they needed to stay put. And considering the protection each weapon provided, they probably didn’t *want* to leave all that much. The wide shield allowed even rookies to stand on the battlefield.

While I contemplated the usefulness of ballistae, the scaly threat arrived.

“Eeeek!”

The final bandit fell to the ground with a shriek before he could reach the moat, so an armored lizard chomped down on his leg and gently shook him. He looked like a ragdoll in the hands of a child—until another lizard bit down on his torso and they commenced a tug-of-war.

His body was torn in half, blood flying everywhere.

“Aurgh...!”

As he rasped out a death rattle, the lizards devoured his body. That had the villagers—and the bandits just below the scene—at their most horrified.

I took a deep breath, then shouted, “Ready!”

The villagers moved on instinct, aiming their ballistae. With forty giant lizards in front of them, it would be difficult to miss.

Smirking to myself, I issued the command: “Fire!”

Simultaneously, I aimed at the face of an armored lizard in the back and loosed the iron bolt. It whistled through the air, hurtling at an incredible speed. The armored lizard raised its head, which seemed to suck the projectile right in.

Then the bolt disappeared.

Surely that was what happened. I peeked out from the side of the shield to check. There was a tiny black dot on the lizard's forehead, and the great beast fell onto its side, twitching. Then, the armored lizard behind it screamed out and contorted in pain.

The screaming lizard had an iron bolt lodged in its front leg.

So I missed it?

I thought as much, but then I noticed that the toppled lizard showed no signs of standing back up. The lizard with the bolt through its leg tore itself free, revealing that the projectile was firmly lodged in the earth.

Looking around, I found that none of the villagers could disguise their shock. Indeed, with the simultaneous firing of fifteen ballistae, tons of armored lizards had collapsed on the ground. Since many of the ballistae were aimed at the same beasts, this wasn't the best possible result, but it was still far beyond my expectations.

"How did it go?"

Lord Van sounded ever so slightly panicked.

"You made something incredible, my lord!"

"Um, in what way?"

"The good way! Our attack just now killed ten lizards!"

A moment passed, and then the villagers cheered.

"That said, we only have one iron bolt left for each weapon. It would be a huge help if we could have the stock from the other ballistae!" I yelled, prompting some of the villagers to scurry off to collect them.

"If you have the chance, test out the wooden bolts too!" he replied. "They're light, but they should be as sharp and tough as the iron ones!"

Seriously?

I had my doubts, but since the lord's interest was piqued, I would give them a try.

"Everyone else prepare your iron bolts and be ready to fire!"

After turning to issue orders, I loaded a wooden bolt, pulled the drawstring, and got ready. Loading the ballistae took less effort than expected, as everyone was already good to fire the next volley.

"Ready!"

As I cried out, everyone took their positions in a synchronized wave. It was wonderful. A single volley had been enough to give everyone a sense of confidence. Confidence enabled positivity, which granted one the power to take initiative. That meant this next volley would be faster, more precise.

"Fire!"

Our bolts went flying. Now that we had villagers firing from the observation towers and corners, this round was twenty-five strong. This harmonized volley was the village's most powerful attack. The bolts slipped right through the lizards' heads and backs, audibly riddling the earth behind them. Right after that, the lizards screeched out their last. It was an astonishing sight to behold.

Unbelievably, my wooden bolt *also* pierced an armored lizard's skull—the same skull that could've deflected an iron sword! Though it was lighter than an iron bolt and couldn't go as deep, the wooden one was still half-lodged in the beast's head.

Shocked as I was, my instincts kicked in and had me barking commands.

"Listen up! Use the wooden bolts! Ready the ballistae!"

We didn't have to wait for the iron bolts to arrive—all we needed was speed and precision. The bows were drawn and the ballistae loaded.

"Ready!"

Some of the villagers were fumbling in their anxiety, but most successfully loaded their ballistae.

"Aim!"

The remaining villagers finished their preparations and aimed their weapons.

“Fire!” I commanded, initiating the third volley.

Only five armored lizards remained. The wooden bolts that pierced their backs or shoulders would cause them pain, but a head shot wrought immediate death. The twenty-five bolts hissed as they sliced through the air. The majority collided with the lizards’ backs, but five—including my own—hit their marks.

What an absurd outcome.

The enemy was annihilated. Not only had our side escaped free of casualties, but we also had no *injuries* to speak of. We’d used fewer than sixty bolts in the battle. Were I to tell the commander about this, he probably would’ve punished me for telling tall tales. He wasn’t one for jokes, so we’d undoubtedly squabble over it.

“Lord Van is going to become a key player, Commander,” I murmured, turning toward the young lad. “He will rise to greater heights than I ever imagined.”

In this moment, however, his expectant gaze made him look every bit his age.

I smiled and raised a fist high in the air. “Victory is ours! The armored lizards have been annihilated. We have won!”

At the news, the village was enveloped in cheers. My fellow fighters atop the wall embraced one another in joy. Till and Khamsin wrapped Lord Van in a hug, grinning ear to ear.

I also saw Esparda dabbing away his tears with a handkerchief as he gazed upon our joyous young lord. I opted to keep the observation to myself, lest he chew me out for mentioning it.

Ortho

ON OUR WAY BACK TO THE VILLAGE, IN HIGH SPIRITS after mining a ton of ore, Kusala abruptly stopped our carriage. Unnerved, I made my way to the front.

“What’s going on?”

Kusala didn’t move a muscle, his eyes glued to the village ahead. I followed his

gaze and immediately understood.

“Armored lizards?!”

Those monsters had hides tough enough to ward off blades. To make matters worse, there were *dozens* of them.

“Damn it! How did this happen?!” I gritted my teeth and drew my sword, but something about the scene struck me as odd.

Pluriel approached from behind, bewildered. “Um, is it just me or are the armored lizards sleeping on their sides?”

“You sure they ain’t dead?”

“No way, right? You’d need two hundred knights from the order to take on a group that large.”

No sooner did those words leave her lips than a cheer rose up from the village.

“Hey, you gotta be kidding me. I’ve had enough surprises this week to last me the year,” I grumbled.

Van

“WE WON!”

I hurried up to the top of the wall while the others declared our victory.

“Well done, Lord Van.”

“You’re amazing!”

With a quick nod to Till and Khamsin, I bounded up the stairs, skipping every other step.

“Ooh, Lord Van! Take a look at the aftermath!”

I slipped past Dee with a few words of praise to the villagers, making my way to the edge of the wall. What I saw was absolutely incredible: a veritable mountain of giant lizard corpses piled up right before the moat. Those things were so gargantuan, they could’ve been called dinosaurs.

“These things are legit dinosaurs!” I blurted out. “There were forty of them?! I’m shocked we won.”

“Gah ha ha ha ha! I’ve never heard of these ‘dino sores,’ but we have your ballistae to thank for this victory! The scales of the armored lizard are said to be as tough as steel, and your bolts pierced them. Not just the iron ones, but the wooden ones as well. They were more powerful than should be possible. Without them, I doubt this village would still exist.” Dee enthusiastically slapped my back.

“Wha—whoa! I almost fell!”

He’d knocked me off balance, so I rattled off a few complaints. But when I looked down, my focus changed completely. Pale-faced bandits were huddled in the moat, looking up at me.

“Right, I forgot about them. Looks like there are only thirty or so left.”

Dee blinked a few times. “Ahh, right! The bandits! Okay, everyone—aim your ballistae into the moat! If they so much as move, open fire!”

The bandits quivered in fear.

Dee glared at them as he threw down some rope. “Use this to bind yourselves. Anyone who wants a shower of bolts, feel free to stand up!” Dee shouted, sending the bandits into a mad scramble to tie each other up.

By the time we walked the bandits to the front of my manor and sat them down, Ortho and his party had returned.

“What’s with all those armored lizard corpses? And who’re the bandits?!” Ortho demanded as their carriage rolled to a stop.

His yelling was enough to make said bandits tremble in terror.

I folded my arms and groaned. “Well, just when we thought the bandits were attacking, it turned out they were being chased by those lizards. We ended up slaughtering them, I guess?”

“H-how did you manage that?! And their corpses are in such good condition! Even we couldn’t take them down easily!”

I wasn't sure how to answer the befuddled adventurer, but I figured there was no point in beating around the bush. "With ballistae?"

"Ballistae?! Are you kidding me?!"

Khamsin proudly chimed in, "We only used sixty bolts."

"Only sixty?!"

Ortho was so stunned that he'd been reduced to a parrot.

Pluriel stepped forward, shoving him out of the way. "You defeated that many armored lizards without Esparda's magic? I'm fairly certain a ballista wouldn't be enough to damage them," she said, confused.

"I was just as surprised as you are, honestly. Oh, but you guys have the swords I made for you, right? You should know how sharp they are."

Ortho and his party exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"Don't tell me those bolts are..."

I nodded. "Yup. They're as sharp as your swords."

That rendered them truly speechless.

At that moment, Dee came over to us. "You gave Ortho and the adventurers swords?"

I could practically hear him crying, *What about me?!*

Behind him, Arb and Lowe looked like they were about to cry.

"No, no, no! You misunderstand. I *sold* them the weapons. A short sword for three gold, a long sword for five...basically. Got it?"

I looked to the adventurers for help, so they each brandished their blades, holding them up to Dee and his men.

"We only encountered small monsters, but we were able to cut through their bones with no effort at all."

"They're thin, light, and easy to swing—yet incredibly sharp. They've been a huge help already."

"He took our requests and made them within minutes, but they look and feel

amazing!”

For some reason, the party members were offering their impressions one after the other like it was some kind of telemarketing pitch. Meanwhile, Dee and his men ground their teeth bitterly. They glared daggers at the adventurers, then rounded on me.

“Lord Van, I wish to buy a sword! How much for a great sword?!”

“I’d like a matching long and short sword set!”

“Likewise!”

The trio crept toward me, peppering me with their sword orders. Their intensity was akin to bloodlust. By contrast, Ortho and his men smiled cheerfully at their new weapons.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at how different they were. Then I shook my head. “I can’t possibly take money from my loyal retainers after you came with me all the way to the middle of nowhere. As long as you do something about the materials, I’d be happy to make complete sets of equipment for all three of you.”

At that, they pumped their fists in tandem.

Ortho made a sour face. “Whaaa...? We’ve been doing a lot for this place too, y’know. We’d love complete sets...”

With his fierce mug, Ortho’s pleading just made him even scarier.

“Nope, not happening,” I replied with a smile. “I plan on doing whatever I can for the villagers, and I welcome subordinates with open arms. But you guys are going to leave eventually, so I need you to spend money here for all our sakes.”

“Gaaah! Why do you have such a good head on your shoulders at the age of eight?!”

Ortho and his people shook their heads rapidly, beyond shocked.

Esparda approached with his ever-composed expression. “This is the result of my education. Lord Van has a fundamental knowledge not just of the world, but also of governance, economics, and politics.”

“It’s all your fault...” Ortho lamented to the sky above.

I smiled at their banter, then looked at each adventurer in turn. “When this place gets its own guild, I’ll be happy to make you guys equipment...*if* you become our village’s exclusive adventurers.”

The party members looked at one another, then formed a huddle to talk it over. I doubted they’d come to a decision here, and if they did rush one out, it’d probably be a “no” anyway. Adventurers were all about freedom, so trying to tie them down in the first place was a mistake.

I turned my gaze on the bandits, never letting my smile drop. “Now then, what should we do with these guys?”

They immediately blanched and begged for mercy.

“I-I swear we’ll change our ways!”

“If you hand us over, it’s the gallows for us!”

“Let us work here!”

They were a pitiable bunch, but I didn’t know what sort of crimes they’d committed. I couldn’t take them at their word, so I figured I’d ask Ronda for his opinion; he’d been here long enough to judge. “What do you think?”

His face hardened as he scowled at the bandits. “We have lost so much to these bastards, including our own people. At least ten, I believe.”

“Guilty as charged, then!”

My decision was swift. There was no way I’d put the villagers in danger or cause them grief by bringing in bandits. Not only was it risky, but I’d lose their trust.

“Sorry, but when the merchant comes, we’ll turn them over.”

“No, please!”

“Don’t do this!”

The bandits whined and whimpered, but I ignored them. That is, until I thought of the perfect job for them.

“All right, my good bandits. Until the merchant comes, I’m going to have you

cut up the armored lizards for materials and parts! Hide, bones, and meat, if you would.” I turned to Ortho. “Does that sound about right?”

He nodded. “The eyes, claws, and teeth should also be preserved. We can’t sell their organs, but we can sell their magic cores.”

“Right, right. Okay. I’ll lend them all my custom wooden swords. They should be able to cut with those if they give it all they’ve got.”

In their despair, the bandits went white as ghosts.

Armored lizards had extremely hard hides, hence their name. Even cutting through it with my amazing wooden swords was no simple feat. The blades were about as big as a large knife, and they were sharp as all get-out. If they were used on the lizards’ soft bellies or inner legs, they’d cut through immediately. Even the bandits could manage it.

Square in the sights of the ballistae, the bandits hurriedly got to work on the corpses. But even with thirty of them going at it, they were only able to take apart four or five lizards in total.

“They ain’t gonna make it in time,” Ortho said. He stood atop the wall, scratching his head. “We’ll have to jump in or else all those parts’ll go to waste.”

He was right; we had no other choice.

On the second day, Ortho’s party, Dee and his men, Khamsin, and villagers with some time to spare took turns dismantling the corpses outside. With the larger workforce and excellent Van-made knives, we managed to wrap things up in just three days.

That night, we held a festival in the village—the first in a very long time, and a massive one at that. After all, the several dozen tons of armored lizard meat would go bad in just a few days. We couldn’t smoke the meat, and there was a limit to making jerky. I figured we should eat as much of it as we could.

On the main street in front of my residence, we set up campfires at regular intervals, distributed long skewers I made on the spot, and dished out meat for people to put on them. We then grilled the meat over the fires. By the way, it

wasn't just my people and the villagers; I also handed meat out to the bandits whom I'd worked to the bone for three days straight.

Amid the crackling flames, everyone was abuzz with excitement. Ronda called me over, so I climbed the several-meter-tall platform and addressed the crowd.

"Um, hello, everyone. I believe that our village has become a stronger, better place thanks to all of your efforts. It's not much, but I'd like to use all this meat for our festival. Tonight, I'm not worrying about expenses. I used plenty of salt and spices so we can have a delicious meal together. As for booze, there is a limit. Two drinks for every person, okay? Please stick to that, and have a good time. All right, everyone. To our victory... Cheers!"

I raised my cup of delicious water, and everyone in the crowd raised their drinks and cheered.

"Cheers, Lord Van!"

"We did it!"

"Hey, grill the meat! The meat, I said!"

"I haven't had booze in ages!"

After the toast, the village square turned into an outdoor pub, almost like a beer garden. We only had some campfires and torches, but this was the villagers' first real festival in ages, and their faces were lit up with joy.

The adventurers got to cooking, conflicted looks on their faces.

"I can't believe we get to eat so much armored lizard meat."

"It's so expensive that we always end up selling it."

"Even if we stuff ourselves silly, some of it'll still go rotten. Man, that sucks."

The meat underneath the lizards' tough armor was fatty and delicious, apparently. I wondered if it had something to do with the plating.

During one of my shifts butchering lizards with Ortho, I'd asked him, "We got quite a lot of lizard materials out of this. How much are we looking at if we sell it all?"

He'd laughed dryly, wagging a finger in the air. "The Adventurers' Guild

usually buys a single armored lizard for ten gold. The merchants then get their stock from the guild, so that's a retail price of twenty gold or so?"

"Uh, we took down forty of these things."

At that, Ortho had snorted out a laugh—the laugh of someone who'd given up on seeking logic. "This horde would've normally required a small army of Chivalric Order knights to take down. Then you would've had to worry about the cost of treating the injured, fixing equipment, and consolation money for families of the dead. You wouldn't come out the other side with much to show for it, but you and this village are just plain weird."

"Zero casualties on our side, yep. Ah, but one of the bandits *did* get hurt while butchering a lizard."

My joke apparently went over poorly, because Ortho just stared at me. "Most of the meat is going to spoil, but even then, one corpse won't get you less than six gold. If you sell to a merchant, you'll still get about eight gold even with shipping charges."

Whoa, that means we're looking at over three hundred gold. That's seriously amazing. In Japan, that would definitely be over three hundred million yen.

After that, I'd encouraged Ortho to keep up the good work, then headed back to my manor to enjoy Till's home cooking. It was the first time I'd tried lizard meat, and I was pretty worried about it. I asked Till to thoroughly sear the surface. On the inside, the meat was tender and overflowing with juices; it was pure delight. As good as any high-class beef, even. Its flavor was reminiscent of hanger steak, but I assumed it varied based on what part of the body you ate.

I ended up devouring five hundred grams of meat, knowing all the while that the villagers would be pleased as punch.

A grin rose to my face as I relished in the memory. It was then that Esparda came over. He glanced at Khamsin, who was grilling meat for the two of us, then stood next to me.

"Congratulations on your handling of those monsters and defending the village."

"Thanks. You were instrumental, what with your work on the wall. C'mon,

have some meat.”

As soon as I spoke, Till started grilling two skewers of meat alongside Khamsin. I looked on happily, but Esparda’s mood seemed to turn apologetic—despite zero change in his expression.

“These are terrific spoils, Lord Van, but in the event a town or village makes more than a hundred gold, they must pay half the sum to the marquis as tax.”

“Hrk!” I accidentally spit out my water.

I totally forgot about the special taxation!

“Is there no way we can keep this quiet?”

“Sadly, no. If we were talking about a single lizard, that might work. But this many will be discovered eventually. And depending on who we sell the corpses to, the nearby count or even the neighboring country could find out,” he said, voice low. “On average, one armored lizard corpse is in circulation every month. If forty suddenly appear, people will catch on to the fact that a huge group was hunted down.”

I slumped in defeat. Just when I thought we’d made three million yen, we were down to half that. Yes, this was easy money, but we’d have big problems if the outside world knew what we were hiding.

“So they’re going to figure out everything that’s happening here, huh?” I asked, but Esparda furrowed his brow and looked away.

“Keeping the village’s secrets will be difficult, but not impossible.”

I was genuinely surprised. Esparda had served our house for decades; no one was as proactive as him when it came to devotion to our house. Yet this very same man was recommending we pull the wool over my father’s eyes. I couldn’t believe it.

This was different than the dungeon. We hadn’t actually located that yet, so I was content with the idea that we couldn’t report unconfirmed information. But now Esparda was trying to conceal the truth of what had transpired here. Perhaps this angle seemed a bit dramatic, but he was essentially betraying Father and choosing my peaceful life over his.

It wasn't the time to get all emotional over this, so I coughed to clear my throat and switched gears. "What do you mean?"

Brow still furrowed, he replied, "We must get in touch with your older brother, Lord Murcia."

"But why?"

I tilted my head as Esparda turned his gaze back toward me, stroking his chin. The fact that he wasn't answering meant this was also a way of testing me. With no other choice, I crossed my arms and started mumbling to myself.

"The village... My brother..." After a few moments' contemplation, I nodded. "I get it. We make this whole armored lizard situation his achievement. The Chivalric Order wouldn't work here, but we could say he used mercs and adventurers. We could say the lizards were spotted in the woods, which was why they managed to defeat the beasts. Brother has been yearning to add some accomplishments to his name as well. This works out perfectly for both of us."

I was no longer in the running for marquis, but my three brothers were in the midst of a fierce battle to become the next lord. I wanted Murcia to win, so this was perfect.

"A wonderful idea, Esparda."

He simply smiled and dipped his head my way.

The festival was a hit.

In fact, people got so crazy that the villagers taking shifts on security detail wound up pushing us to keep going. One hundred and fifty people participated in the meat gauntlet that night, yet somehow we'd barely made a dent in the full stash.

"Man, this is so good! Just delicious!"

"Urgh... I can't take another bite..."

"I wonder if we'll be able to have some tomorrow too..."

Even after the festival had wrapped up, villagers appeared one after the other to snack on the meat. Apparently, feeding them was the right idea; people continually stopped to say hello while I was doing the rounds the next morning.

“Good morning, Lord Van! Boy, that meat was phenomenal!”

“Thank you for patrolling the village!”

“Can I marry Till, Lord Van?”

“Huh?!”

I was tremendously happy to be greeted so amicably every time I walked somewhere, but I had issues with that last guy. He had to get through Dee before he earned the right to utter those words. I didn’t want anyone to take Till away from me, so I held her hand as we walked.

“It’s been quite some time since you last held my hand, my lord... Hee hee. Looking to be doted on, are we?” she asked, overflowing with affection.

Well, I *was* eight years old. I had the right to act like a little kid. The only problem was that everyone showered us with warm smiles as we walked down the main road. It was embarrassing.

“Oh, you’re letting go?” She seemed saddened by this, but her master was in fact the lord of the land. Being cute was important, but so was maintaining a sense of dignity.

“Hey, Till? I’m going to find you the nicest fiancé imaginable, okay?”

She offered me a gentle smile, the sort an older sister might offer her grumpy little brother. “Taking care of you is my duty, Lord Van. I’ve yet to give any thought to marriage.”

I frowned. “Yeah, but if you keep putting it off, it might be too late.”

“Hrk! Er, d-don’t worry about that!” she said, her smile twitching.

At the end of the day, Till was eighteen years old; it wouldn’t have been unusual for her to be married already. Then again, it was common in this world to delay marriage until as late as age twenty-five, even if it was more typical to get married between fifteen and twenty.



Fine. If she's unwed by the time she hits twenty-five, I'll marry her myself.

As I thought about such things, we finally arrived at the village's entrance. I looked left and right, then made for the observation tower. A slacker was on shift up there, and I needed to check in on him. I climbed up the steps to the roof, where Lowe was leaning on the thick railing. I stood next to him and gazed out onto the road.

"Anything new?"

"Nope. Super boring up here," he said with a pained smile. "Working the fields and drawing water is way more of a pain than this, though, so I can't complain."

He turned and came face-to-face with Till—who was his height—and then looked down to see Khamsin and myself. When our eyes locked, he froze. Our stare-off lasted a few moments before he shrank back in terror.

"Gah! Lord Van?! I-I-I'm so sorry! I swear, I wasn't goofin' off or anything!"

He rattled off excuses as sweat rolled down his face. I simply smiled and looked over at the village. "You're supposed to be keeping an eye on things outside of the village. It's not 'goofing off' at all. Just make sure to look at areas other than just the road." As my smile widened, he stood ramrod straight and whirled back to the outskirts.

"W-wait, look!" Lowe cried, pointing at the far end of the road.

I strained my eyes, but all I could see was a shadowy dot on the horizon. I stared as hard as I could until one of the observers in the tower opposite ours called out.

"Merchants! It's Bell and Rango!"

He knows who they are from this far away?!

Astonished, I glanced at Till and Khamsin, but they were both squinting at the road with the same expression as me.

Oh, good. It's not that my eyesight is bad.

Relief washed over me. Shortly after, I was able to make out the merchants

and their two carriages. There were more people than I'd expected—five or six in addition to the two merchants themselves. Needless to say, they weren't close enough for me to identify them in any meaningful way.

"Guess we should raise the bridge and get the ballistae ready."

"What?! They're not bandits, Lord Van!"

Lowe was stunned, but just because there were two recognizable faces didn't mean we were in the clear. "It's entirely possible that there are bandits huddled inside those carriages. Heck, the guards and the other merchants could be bandits too. It's also possible they're being threatened," I said, and he fell silent in his agitation.

He probably still didn't get it, but that was fine. I was okay with being overly cautious if it kept the village safe.

"Till, call Dee and Ortho!"

"Okay!" Till replied, then ran off.

"Now then, this is our chance," I said, looking down at my short sword. The behemoth relief—our house crest—shone in the light.

I'd been waiting for this moment. There was so much I needed to do: sell the lizard parts and meat to make money, purchase spices and food we didn't have, and collect information on other towns and villages as well as Ferdinatto County next door. I also needed to advertise our amazing local specialty. Whether this opportunity went to waste relied entirely on my abilities.

A smile grew on my face as the merchants' features finally came into view.

Chapter 7:

The Merchants

THE TWO MERCHANTS, BELL AND RANGO, GAWKED at the wall with eyes and mouths wide open. They had been discussing something with their guards—who were probably adventurers—before I called out to them.

“You appear to be merchants! I am the lord of this village, Van Nei Fertio. Good fellows, might I have your names and the names of your company? As for your guards, it would be splendid if I could get their titles and names as well.”

The merchants and adventurers exchanged glances and began to chat among themselves again. After a bit, the young merchant in the front spoke up.

“I-I’m Bell from the Mary Chamber of Commerce. This man here is my little brother, Rango. Our guard is Ayer, adventurer and leader of the B-rank party Silver Spears.”

Rango bowed his head, and the bald guy named Ayer held up his silver spear.

I looked at Ortho, who stood beside me. “Know them?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’ve bumped into them at the guild pretty frequently, and we’ve even gone drinking together.”

Satisfied, I turned my gaze back on Bell. “You have permission to enter. Welcome to my village!”

The villagers hurriedly lowered the bridge and opened the front doors. Keeping an eye on them, I quickly returned to the ground and made my way to the front doors. Bell and his entourage were driving their carriages with bewildered looks on their faces. I managed to meet them right as they entered the village.

The first person to greet them was Ronda. “We’ve been waiting. Thank you for coming,” he said while the rest of the villagers excitedly surrounded the carriages. It must’ve been a while since new goods had been delivered; they were clearly thrilled.

Bell seemed relieved that the village was in its usual state, as his stiff expression soon melted into a smile.

“Hiya! Sorry about all that. Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Van,” I said with a smile.

With a furrowed brow, Bell bowed deeply and met my gaze. “I’m Bell, and it’s a pleasure to meet you. By the way, I do hope I’m not being rude, but are you House Fertio’s youngest, Lord Van?”

I tilted my head. “Yes. But how do you know me?” My house was certainly famous, but I didn’t consider myself to be of any repute.

“Well, it’s just that you’ve been the talk of the town, you see... People have been asking where the family genius went off to.”

I blinked rapidly at this reveal, my mouth clamped shut.

Bell

WHILE WE WERE DRIVING DOWN THE ROAD in the carriage, I turned to my little brother, Rango. “Man, this is a drag... Edge Village is all the way out in the middle of nowhere. Even if we sell spices and necessities, we won’t make much.”

I was referring to a nameless village right near the border. We called it “Edge Village.”

“And we’re not gonna be bringing anything back from Edge Village either. We’re gonna be in the red big-time.” Rango had sympathetic complaints of his own.

Usually we’d come out reasonably in the black. We sold our goods in the biggest city, then the second-biggest city, then went around to towns, then finally made our way back to the second city, then off to the first, then home. This was our typical route. Bringing high-class goods from the biggest city to the second-biggest was good business. Then, in the second city, we’d buy clothes, spices, and gems that would sell reasonably well in the next town. We’d stock up on a bunch of cheap spices there, buy up some cheap necessities, and then

do the rounds. It took about a month to run this circuit.

At Edge Village, we could at most purchase lumber or monster hide. Neither of those made any money for us and transporting it all was a pain, so we turned down the offers every time. We only made a profit of five or six gold, so other merchants weren't big fans. After all, half of our profits were taken by the company. And after having three gold taken from us, we also had to pay taxes to the marquis, so we brothers ended up with two or three gold at most.

If we used any money for ourselves, we were left with less than two gold. The remaining funds enabled us to purchase better goods to raise our profits for next time, repair the carriage, or take care of our horses. If we could save at least one gold per month, we were doing all right.

But this time around, our carriage was damaged and we had to pay for repairs, *plus* a week of living expenses and hiring fees for the adventurers. To make matters worse, the carriage had toppled over on its side, so a lot of our goods were damaged and couldn't be sold anymore. All this had us deep in the red, and that was why we loaded up on stock. We were already screwed, so why not?

We purchased enough spices, booze, and daily necessities to fill two carriages. We intended to sell these on our usual route, and if we didn't, we'd go so far as to take a shot in a town in the neighboring count's territory.

Thus, we arrived at Edge Village awash with feelings of desperation. That was when we noticed how...different things were.

"Hey, is that Edge Village? It's clearly way too big to be a village," Ayer said, and I gave a noncommittal nod.

"Yeah... I agree."

Ayer frowned at that, but what else could I have said? This village used to be filled with busted huts, significantly poorer-looking than the other settlements. In fact, it was such a sad little place that townspeople in similar locations used to deride it as "the village at the end of the world."

So why was there a tall stone wall with three-story-high watchtowers on each side? I wasn't sure what *those* were made of, but it clearly wasn't wood or

stone. And then sitting atop those towers were large ballistae lining the upper wall. The drawbridge was currently raised at the entrance, and it had a moat. A moat!

“Did we take a wrong turn?” Rango asked, but I had no answer. I could say with certainty that we hadn’t taken the wrong route, but I couldn’t guarantee that this was the right village.

Even as we reeled, the carriages rolled on to the end of the road.

There was in fact a moat, and it was quite deep. The wall seemed new yet incredibly sturdy. This whole place was like its own fortified city. Atop the walls were familiar-looking villagers standing guard with the large ballistae. Upon closer inspection, the ballistae in question were equipped with shields on the front.

That explains why their form is so original.

As we marveled at the defensive wall, someone called down to us.

“You appear to be merchants! I am the lord of this village, Van Nei Fertio. Good fellows, might I have your names and the names of your company? As for your guards, it would be splendid if I could get their titles and names as well.”

Judging by the little lord’s voice, he was young; I would’ve been hard-pressed to identify him as a boy at first.

“Uh, hey, Bro...? Did they just say Van Nei Fertio?”

At Rango’s baffled voice, I whirled around. “You mean House Fertio’s fourth son? No way! There are all sorts of rumors about him.”

Ayer and the others nodded. “Our base of operations is in the largest city, so we’ve seen him a few times. That kid used to patrol the place all the time. He’s famous for constantly stopping to chat with folks.”

“I see.”

I’d heard tales like that before. Since we siblings only spent a week at most in the city, we had never seen the fourth son in the flesh. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that he really was a boy not even ten years old.

Obviously, all sorts of gossip circulated about the fourth son, especially

because of how often he came into the city. Word had it that he was a genius among geniuses. Just by asking merchants a few questions, he could understand the trade and offer accurate advice regarding how to increase sales or what type of products to sell. Even when he spoke to commoners, he was friendly and considerate in a way that was remarkable for his age. When a boy was about to be sold into slavery, the little lord had used his own money to save him, or so I'd heard.

Rumors tended to distort the truth about a person, so I always took them with a grain of salt. That said, when I heard the fourth son had left the city, I was curious. Apparently, he'd been sent off to this middle-of-nowhere village to be its lord. I couldn't wrap my head around why, though.

Sure, genius children got bullied and pushed around—but Lord Van was expressly chased off to this podunk village. Yet, as far as I could tell, it was receiving quite a bit of aid. I had several theories as to why this was the case, but sitting here and guessing wasn't going to get me anywhere.

I faced the little lord and introduced myself. "I-I'm Bell from the Mary Chamber of Commerce. This man here is my little brother, Rango. Our guard is Ayer, adventurer and leader of the B-rank party Silver Spears."

"You have permission to enter. Welcome to my village!"

We'd been permitted entry fairly quickly. The drawbridge was smoothly lowered, connecting the road to the village. The large front doors swung open, giving us a view of the village. It looked nothing like it did in my memories.

There were sturdy-looking houses neatly lining the main streets. I had no idea what they were made of, but they were a sight to behold. The ground was still dirt, but the village was so well constructed that I didn't think anything of it. It wasn't until I actually looked at the people approaching us that I realized we'd arrived at the correct destination.

"We've been waiting. Thank you for coming," said Ronda, the village mayor.

The villagers swarmed our carriages. We only came by once a month, so the folks here welcomed our arrival. They were always so overjoyed at our presence that we made sure to drop by, even though we never made much money here.

While we said our hellos, Lord Van walked toward us. “Hiya! Sorry about all that. Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Van.”

I greeted him in return. After chatting with him a bit, I was certain that this child named Van truly was a genius, and it had nothing to do with his noble upbringing. The villagers confirmed my suspicions: the changes here were all thanks to Lord Van and his people. It was hard to believe, but they had nothing to gain by lying, and I could tell they were telling the truth.

According to the villagers, they were being attacked by a group of bandits when Lord Van and his people saved them. The boy and his entourage built a defensive wall around the village that was far stronger than the last, then went on to build new houses for them. On top of that, Lord Van designed the new ballistae and made them himself.

The rumors were all true—and because of that, I was overwhelmingly interested in this child.

“Think we can sell some armored lizard parts?”

In response to Lord Van’s question, I nodded. “But of course! You defeated armored lizards? That’s incredible! Those are powerful creatures—even adventurers hate having to contend with them!”

An entirely unexpected source of revenue! I never thought I’d get my hands on such a valuable resource in a place like this.

Rango and I happily joined hands. Here we thought we were in the red, but we’d apparently made a massive miscalculation.

Thank you, God!

Grinning ear to ear, my brother and I followed Lord Van to the materials storehouse. It was a large, two-story building tucked away just to the right of the entrance.

Did he design it to shield the materials from sunlight, wind, and rain?

Impressed, I entered the building—and what I saw took my breath away.

“Uh, ha ha... Surely you’re joking!” Rango said. “Don’t tell me you

encountered a group of twenty-or thirty-meter-tall armored lizards!”

What he said was the peak of absurdity, but the sight in front of us prevented me from calling him out.

As it so happened, the building wasn’t two stories; it was a single-story interior with an abnormally high ceiling. Inside, armored lizard hides were stacked so high that they almost reached the ceiling. There was also a mountain of claws, a mountain of fangs, a mountain of bones, and a mountain of magic cores piled up like stones.

Lord Van then turned to us with a smile. “Oh, when we killed these forty armored lizards, we also arrested thirty bandits. I was thinking of having you guys take them *and* the materials with you. What do you think? Ah, and we’d provide the transportation, of course.”

“W-wait, this is an absurd number... If I could have some time, maybe a month from now—no, less than that—I could get some help from the company. Can you wait until then?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Lord Van said. “Would it be better if we all ate the meat, then?”

That was when I realized that there had to be enough armored lizard meat to match the quantity of parts I was looking at; perhaps ten to twenty tons. A village of one or two hundred people could never eat it all before it spoiled.

“Meat, you say? Um, if it’s all right with you, do you mind if I sell it to the town next door? It’d be a huge help if you cut me a bit of a deal too.”

Lord Van cocked a brow. “The next town over? Do they have the means to buy armored lizard meat?”

I could tell he didn’t mean this as an insult. He seemed genuinely curious. I forced out a smile and raised one of my palms.

“No, they don’t have much to speak of, actually. But since tax collection this year, they haven’t been able to stock anything, so they asked if I could procure some food for them...”

I was thinking about handing out the meat without charging the townspeople.

If we could make a huge profit off of the armored lizard materials later, we'd recover easily.

Lord Van studied my face, then shook his head. "As far as the meat goes, about half of it is bound to go bad. You can have it for free. I doubt you'd stand to profit much from that stuff anyway, y'know?" He grinned, and my breath caught in my throat.

"You have my gratitude. In exchange, I'll pay handily for the bandits. Four large silvers apiece."

That made for a total of twelve gold. To merchants, this was an absurd price. We stood to gain little from selling them off. If we brought them all the way back from the border, we'd have to sell each one for a single gold if we hoped to make any kind of profit.

Nobles could never understand this, but it was our way of showing sincerity.

In response, Lord Van nodded, smile widening. "Thanks a ton! And hey, if you're willing to come back soon, I'll make sure you don't regret it. For example, we'll have high-quality weapons and such waiting for you."

I tilted my head. "Are you telling me that you have not only a talented designer and a skilled carpenter, but a blacksmith as well?"

I was stunned, but Lord Van grinned with glee, eyes crinkling.

It was an incredible sword.

Despite its decorative design, it possessed an intimidating air befitting a weapon. I didn't know much about these kinds of things, but I could tell that even as a piece of art, it held tremendous value.

"What do you think? How much would it be worth?"

I handed the sword to Ayer, a real pro, who was transfixed by the weapon. He didn't say a word until the adventurer named Ortho spoke to him.

"Here. This is a chunk of armored lizard hide."

Ortho grinned and held the tough hide out to Ayer, who brought out his own

blade and cut into the surface—but it only left a tiny line. This was surprising to me, but Ayer just nodded.

“This is indeed armored lizard hide. May I give this sword a try?”

“Be my guest,” Lord Van replied in a relaxed tone.

Ayer looked skeptical, but he nonetheless brought the beautiful long sword up to the hide. He cut down, then pulled.

“What?! I-Impossible!”

His eyes bulged as he drew the sword back. When I looked to see what had happened, I found a fresh, clean cut in the hide.

“It felt like I was slicing poultry!”

“Crazy, right?” Ortho said with a smile. He pointed to the sword at his waist, which gave off a similar impression to the one Ayer had tested. “Made to order for five gold. I requested that the length and width make it easy to swing. Can you believe that? It’s made of iron too.”

“Five gold?! That’s way too cheap! I must buy one! Do they have spears?!” Ayer excitedly asked the smiling adventurer.

“I’d trust this blade with my life. If you’re gonna make an order, make sure you think about its form and weight in as detailed a way as possible,” Ortho said. “Just to be clear, you’re gonna get something far lighter and stronger than you imagine. And remember, if you’re gonna have it made for parrying as well, make sure that part’s not as sharp.”

Ayer’s gaze dropped as he stroked his chin. I watched him mutter to himself for a few moments. “I-I see... Being too sharp *can* be a problem...”

Casting a glance at Ayer, I said, “This is clearly an extraordinary weapon. I will gladly purchase it at the asking price. However, we have so much already that I won’t be able to bring it all back with me. I’m sorry, but—”

“Oh, you can come another day. No problem.”

“Thank you so much,” I told Ortho, dipping my head in gratitude.

And so we toured the village a bit and sold spices, alcohol, and necessities to

Lord Van. I felt like we were the only ones profiting from the exchange, especially since we also wound up with the armored lizard meat and I got a personal short sword.

“You’re so lucky, Bro...”

I couldn’t be the only one with a sword, so I bought another for three gold. Rango gazed at his Van-made blade like a child who’d received a new toy.

He’s already eighteen, so I hope he takes it down a notch, I thought with a smile.

I roasted some armored lizard meat and took a bite, which gave me my umpteenth shock of the day.

At some point, this village had taken hold of me. I needed to give some serious thought to what we’d do in the future. Once I got home, I would need to speak to the president.

Our business might take off if we build a store here.

But first, we needed to have merchants regularly coming and going.

“I was thinking of negotiating with the president and getting a midsize caravan put together. What do you think, Rango?”

“Great idea. Or we could make two merchant teams of three carriages each and have them come here every two weeks.”

“Right, right... In that case, we could meet up at one of the villages or towns on the way.”

We both smiled as we discussed matters.

“Things are gonna get real busy from here on out.”

“Yeah. I can’t wait.”

Van

WE ATE DINNER TOGETHER, BELL AND RANGO happily devouring the armored lizard meat. They asked me about things going forward, and I gave them a

general idea of my plan for the village. They seemed extremely interested, which was a win in my book. They asked me whether I'd like them to continue making one major merchant visit each month or whether we should up it to twice a month. I told them the latter would be best.

I welcomed access to more spices and booze. Having good food meant that the villagers would be happy and energized, which would have a direct effect on engagement and productivity. However, when I asked the merchants to advertise our weapons, they gave me sullen looks. Apparently the brothers had been planning to monopolize my creations.

You are incredibly naive, my friends.

If they sold my weapons on the same old route, people would eventually connect them to the source. They would be better off advertising for us from the start, then figuring out a way to profit off greater sales numbers. When I told them as much, they latched on to the idea with wide eyes.

"How?!"

"Set up a shop in the village and sell them from here. It'd be possible if you hired a shop keeper or a monger."

The two traded grins. In the end, it was determined that Bell would have a shop here in the village until things took shape. To celebrate, I built him a house for five gold. Now we wouldn't have to negotiate with all kinds of merchants over and over again.

Quite frankly, both sides had something to gain from this. Bell and Rango would obtain a stable source of income and have their own store. I would save time, and we'd have our first store in the village. This was a big step.

Amid the friendly chatter, our business discussions came to an end.

The next morning, Rango said he'd be leaving with Ayer and the others, then got things ready to go. He made it sound like we were a married couple having a fight after the honeymoon period, but actually it was a totally positive business-related conversation.

Speed was key to maximizing profit. As such, Rango needed to go back to the company and convince them as quickly as possible so that they could acquire materials and extra hands. To sway them to our side, he was bringing a sword I'd made, some armored lizard hide, and magic cores. If things went well, Rango would be flanked by a full squad of merchants the next time he showed up here.

All smiles, Rango purchased a sword and departed with his entourage.

By the way, as part of my plan to deny responsibility for my achievements, I gave Rango a letter intended for Murcia. It had my seal on it, so I figured it'd be fine. Rango questioned why I would cover up my accomplishments until the very moment he left, so I just dodged him with some vague answers.

After seeing everyone off, I turned to Bell. "All right, time to whip you up a shop."

"Er, right now?" he asked, surprised.

I motioned for him to come over. "I think it should face the main street," I said, pointing. "It'd be best if the village entrance was close by, right?"

Bell, in turn, pointed to an open spot right near the entrance. "Over there seems like a good spot. The store is visible right from the village entrance, which would make it convenient."

"Then we'll set you up there. Next, we have to discuss the layout. The entrance would go here... How about having the counter in the front?"

"Uh, yeah. Right, as long as I can see the store from there. I'd also like to come up with a way to display our goods."

"Hrm, then something more like a general goods store than a grocery store, eh? The vibes of an import shop might be good too. Instead of lining the store with all your products, having only a handful on display would help it seem more high-class. Want to try displaying swords and such on the wall? One for each type?"

"Huh? Um, y-yeah, sure. That might be good. But then I have to consider where my stock would go..."

“Let’s set you up with a basement. If I make you a two-story home, that should give you all the space you need.”

Our conversation continued smoothly, and we quickly put together the layout for his store. If he had any issues with the finished product, I could just fix what needed fixing. I’d happily do a single reconstruction for free. I called Esparda over since we were making a basement, but renovating the whole thing would probably be tough work.

With that in mind, I lined up the wood blocks—brought to the building site by Khamsin and Till—and solidified the vision in my mind. I sensed Bell watching in confusion, but I let him be. I focused my magic and altered the shape of the wood blocks.

“Huh?! What the...?!”

I ignored the surprised shout from behind and got to work.

First, I put up the columns. I would have Esparda use his earth magic to dig up the ground. As long as he made a good-sized hole for me, I’d be set. I made a floor, walls, and a ceiling, then joined everything to the pillars.

Next, I made the basement. The vast space was up before I even realized it. I ended up installing four thick pillars, but even with those present, there was plenty of space for storage. I left Bell behind as he wandered the basement with bloodshot eyes, then got to work making the first and second floors.

Since I’d spent so much time making homes for the villagers, my work on Bell’s store wrapped up fairly quickly. In total, I spent about an hour on the basement and maybe fifteen minutes on the first and second floors combined. Bell had been so out of it wandering the basement that, when he emerged, he was startled to find that his store and house were already done. He gaped at me in disbelief, but I just kept doing my thing.

Bell had two weeks to procure and prepare his products. His store was all good for the moment.

It was noon, so we seasoned some lizard meat for an indulgent lunch. I then informed everyone that I was headed out.

“Hmm, I should bring Esparda and Dee with me,” I mused. “And someone

familiar with the area.”

I gathered some folks and asked around; Ronda recommended a hunter by the name of Inka. “He hunts fairly often. His vision is superb.”

I’m pretty sure you all have amazing vision, I thought, but I kept my lips shut and merely nodded in response.

Inka was called over, and he puffed out his chest with one eye closed.

“Can you take us to the river?” I asked.

Inka nodded and walked off in that direction. Dee, his knights, and Ortho were going to the woods to gather resources, so they tagged along. Esparda had work to do, so he was coming too—as were Till and Khamsin.

Ten minutes after leaving the village and heading down the road, we turned north. The road continued, but it was just barely suitable for travel.

I’m glad we didn’t come by carriage.

“Are you okay?” Till asked, worried, so I forced myself to walk properly.

“Yup, I’m all good! How about you?” I never forgot to show consideration to the people around me. I was a man, after all.

“I’m well! Thank you for asking,” Till replied happily as she trotted onward.

Khamsin was ahead of us, getting rid of any weeds or stones in our way.

What a gentleman!

Since not much was going down on the way to the river, I endeavored to be as much of a gentleman as Khamsin, but his swift and quiet clearing methods far outstripped mine. It was a one-sided rivalry at best, and we arrived at our destination before I could settle the score.

The river was far bigger and more beautiful than I’d expected, and it glittered in the sunlight. Without a bridge or a boat, getting to the other side would be a bit of a struggle. As far as I could tell, there were no aquatic monsters in sight, but I wasn’t about to test that by taking a dip. Furthermore, we had no idea as to the quality of the water.

“Okay, Esparda. Let’s get some water from here. It’s work time.”

“Right away, my lord.” Esparda dipped his head in acknowledgment.

Our primary order of business was to create a fork in the river that would lead to the village, taking breaks whenever necessary. First, Esparda made a small dam and dug out the area that would form the distributary channel. He managed to dig dozens of meters deep in a single moment, and Dee and Khamsin jumped in with absurd vigor when he rested. Then Till and I strengthened the ground and wall.

Given the distance between the wall and the river, we all said this would be a big job, but it was going by unexpectedly fast. I was just as astonished by Esparda’s seemingly endless supply of magic as I was by Dee’s everlasting stamina.

“Gah ha ha ha!”

Arb and Lowe plopped down in exhaustion while Dee dug with a shovel I’d made. He roared with laughter, seemingly having a blast.



“Quite a lot of energy for a forty-year-old man,” Esparda said, exasperated.

Dee’s forty? That’s kind of incredible.

While wasting my brain space on such thoughts, I spent half a day pulling water. Much to my surprise, the village came into view about eight hours into the project. We’d worked at an insane pace. It had taken us nearly an hour on foot just to get to the river, maybe four kilometers or so. Yet we’d managed to dig our way back in eight hours; we probably only had about a kilometer to go.

“All right, that’s all for today,” I announced.

Dee and Esparda stared at me like I’d said something wild, but I wanted them to consider Arb, Lowe, and Khamsin. Those three were completely dead.

“Hrm, and just when I thought I’d found a good source of exercise,” Dee said. “But I suppose it’s better not to push ourselves too hard.”

Nobody else is going to call this guy out? How in the world does he still have energy?! Is he just a meathead?

It was so impossible to wrap my head around that I began to disparage him in my mind. Esparda likewise looked perfectly composed.

How terrifying... Today, I’ve come face-to-face with the true potential of veterans and older men.

Ortho and the others had no interest in creating the distributary channel, so they’d gathered a whole bunch of ore for me. However, I was so exhausted that I turned down the opportunity to make swords.

The next morning, we managed to dig all the way to the village’s moat. We stifled our impatience and made a path for the water to flow out the other side of the village. Just past that, we made a deep reservoir—one designed so that the water would pass through it once its level rose. In all honesty, I wanted to design it so that the water would ultimately return to the river, but I’d save that for another time. For now, I really wanted to see the water come through.

We rode carriages back to the river, left them on the road, and then walked to our destination once again. It was there that I expressed my appreciation for everyone’s work.

“Um, it is thanks to all of your hard efforts that I can now say this job is complete. I know the past day and a half has been rough on all of you, but you have my sincerest gratitude. Now then, let’s open this baby up!”

As soon as I finished my little speech, the dam was destroyed, and water flowed down the new channel.

“Oooh, wonderful!”

I couldn’t help but clap as I watched it go, and everyone else followed suit. Just watching the river water rush down the path we’d created was terribly exciting.

We drove back to the village at a leisurely pace, following the channel. Our waterway must have been well constructed, as the rush of water showed no signs of slowing down. Quite frankly, it was so smooth that I actually started to worry, so I made a mental note to check on the moat later.

Upon our return, the villagers lowered the bridge and opened the doors for us.

“Wow, water!”

“It’s water from the river!”

People clustered around to marvel at the water flowing into the moat. Children ran alongside it, yelling in delight. I honestly wanted to join them.

“Super cool!”

Ronda walked over and said, “Now we have easy access to water.”

I shook my head. “Up until now, people haven’t been handling drinking water properly. I want to filter and boil it as well, which is why I need to build some equipment.”

“Er, I see...” Ronda attempted to hide his confusion behind a smile.

Meanwhile, I got Dee and his knights to ready the ore for me. “This way!”

Lowe was surprisingly driven for once as he carried over a whole bunch of ore for me. His eyes glittered as he watched me.

“Interested?” I asked him.

“Y-yes! I was just wondering what kind of equipment you’d be making this time.”

His curiosity about my creations surprised me.

Now that I think about it, he seemed over the moon when we wrapped up our river construction project.

“How about we do this together, then? First, we’re going to make a waterwheel to lift the water.”

“Right!”

Lowe gleefully carried over the materials, and I changed their form with Dee and Arb as backup. We set the waterwheel on one side of the moat, then attached buckets to its side at regular intervals. As the wheel spun, the buckets would lift the water up high.

After the water reached the top of the wall, the buckets would tilt as they came down, creating a waterway to the village. This water would flow through a filtration unit made from sticks, leaves, sand, dirt, stone, and cloth. The clean water would then go straight into a metal tank. Since the inside and outside of the tank were coated in copper, it wouldn’t rust, keeping the water nice and clean.

Once we had enough water in the tank, we could draw what we needed from a faucet at the bottom and bring it to the boiling device. Unfortunately, when it came to boiling the water, we had to ignite the flames on our own. Till explained that we could easily start fires if we had a fire crystal, so I’d have to look into purchasing one.

For now, we had safe, potable water.

Right when I was teaching Ronda how the equipment worked, Khamsin came running over. “It’s full!”

I was definitely not expecting that report. Only three hours had passed since we opened up the waterway, and the tank was full before dinner? I hurried up the wall.

“Whoa, it really is full.”

I couldn't help but be impressed; the river water had already filled the moat. That wasn't necessarily a good thing, though.

"If it rained and the water level rose, wouldn't it overflow?"

Esparda, who was standing behind me and to the side, stared at me with wide eyes. "Excellent observation. Normally, one would widen the river according to the amount of water or perhaps build banks in areas that overflow frequently. For a waterway with a dead end like this, we'll have to make some adjustments."

Hey, Esparda actually praised me!

"There's nowhere else for the water to go, after all. We should send the water downstream or create a lake on the other side."

Esparda frowned. "Normally the former would suffice," he said in a low voice, "but the lake might be a better idea. During long periods of drought, or should water from the river cease to flow, it would be good to have a large reservoir."

"So all we really need to do is take overflow countermeasures? All right, let's go with that then."

And so I decided to build a lake about two hundred meters away from the back of the village. I was going to push construction through before it rained.

"It doesn't have to be cone-shaped. Just make it so it can hold as much as possible!"

"Understood!"

"It's going to be sloped, so let's angle it so the water flows to that side."

"Got it!"

As I described the image in my head, Dee and the others made it a reality. Esparda was constructing the banks and the lake's overall shape. Lo and behold, the lake was completed in three days' time. All that remained was to build a manually operated floodgate to prevent disasters. As for anything else, we'd have to test it out and think on it some more.

But we had plenty of clean water, and that was enough for me at the moment.

Chapter 8:

Visitor after Visitor

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAS AWOKEN BY A STAMPEDE of anxious villagers outside.

“Isn’t it kinda early...? The sun’s not even up yet,” I said tiredly.

Till nodded and cleaned up my bedhead. “Apologies, my lord. Ronda and the others seemed a bit panicked, so Sir Dee and Esparda are already headed over to the site.”

“Uh, what site?”

“Lake Van.”

“I don’t remember naming it that.”

Nope. Definitely don’t remember.

“It was apparently declared Lake Van to commemorate your - accomplishments so your name would go down in history. By the way, they’ve also named this place Van Village...”

“Please, no! This all feels terribly wrong!”

I hurried out of the manor and came upon a pale-faced villager.

“L-Lord Van!” he cried. “Come this way!”

Fool, don’t leave me behind!

I begrudgingly followed him at a brisk pace as he exited the village and ran around to the back.

Okay, yeah, I need to build a back entrance. Having to go around the whole village is a pain.

Together, we headed to the lake, where a crowd made up of a bunch of villagers, Dee and his knights, and Esparda had gathered. Heck, even Ortho and his party were there.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

They opened a path for me, revealing the large lake shimmering in the sun. Sure, I'd made it and all, but boy, was it big. That said, there was an unfamiliar silhouette on the surface of the lake. Something round was poking out of the water.

It's a head.

"What is that?"

Esparda was the one to respond. "I believe she is an aquatic demihuman—an apkallu. They live in beautiful rivers deep within the woods and are rarely seen by the likes of men."

"Apkallu, huh? Never heard of them..."

Upon closer inspection, the girl was childlike. Her blue hair gave her a mystical air, and her skin was dark. The apkallu's eyes were black, and fin-like ears peeked out from the gaps in her long hair.

"What's your name?" I asked.

The apkallu said nothing. Maybe she didn't understand human words. I figured I'd try feeding her as a show of friendship.

"Till, go with Khamsin and grab some meat for me."

"On it!"

The pair immediately ran off. While they were gone, the apkallu and I simply stared at each other. Eventually, they returned with a chunk of meat, and I noticed the creature react ever so slightly.

"I wonder if she's hungry."

If she was, this was my chance. I took a cut of meat from Khamsin and waved my hand at the apkallu, who cautiously approached.

"Whoa..."

I could hear the villagers' hushed reactions as they watched.

Dee and Ortho discreetly gripped the handles of their swords, but I paid them no mind and continued to call over the apkallu. Soon the creature was right in front of me. If we reached out, we could touch each other.

I offered the meat, and the apkallu rose up till her shoulders were above the water. She leaned in and sniffed it a few times, showing no signs of hostility. Up close, she really did look human. Her eyes were bigger than normal, and she had a small nose. Her face was also quite round. The biggest difference was definitely in the ears—and what appeared to be gills on her neck.

“Can I eat this?”

“Oooh, you can talk!”

The apkallu’s cute voice caused me to shout in excitement, which prompted her to dive back underwater. She then poked her head out from a distance. These demihumans could move at incredible speeds underwater, which made sense since they were like large fish.

Unfortunately, I seemed to have put her on her guard; she only had half of her head out of the water and was eyeing me carefully. Even with such a grumpy face, she still looked cute, so nothing about this standoff came across as scary.

“Hey, I’m really sorry. Come back, please?”

I tried calling out to the girl again, but this time she turned her face away.

Did I hurt her feelings?

“Do we have any fruit, Till?”

“Sure do! I’ll fetch some right away!”

Plan B was to appeal to her sweet tooth. Sweets were hard to come by around here, so sugar-dense fruit was very popular. Only nobles had the money to obtain expensive goods like sugar. Well, plus the merchants who had it in stock.

As a result, dessert culture was way underdeveloped in this world. If things like sugar and butter found their way into the hands of commoners more often, there’d be far more treats on the market. Personally, I wanted to eat a pastry with lots of butter, but that proved rather difficult.

Anyhow, the point was that unless you were exceedingly wealthy or a member of the nobility, you couldn’t eat tasty sweets. So when Till returned

with sweet fruits in hand, and I called for the apkallu, the effect was immediate.

Her eyes sparkled as she slowly came closer again, still half-submerged.

“Would you like meat or fruit?” I asked.

The apkallu wrinkled her brow in silence for a few moments before rising just enough to speak. “Meat and fruit.”

“You got it,” I said with a smile, handing the girl a cut of meat.

She gently took it from me, swam a short distance away, then ate it. Her eyes popped wide open and she whirled to face me, still chowing down. Once it was all gone, her expression went taut. Her eyes flicked over the knights and adventurers.

“This meat...” she murmured, trailing off.

Tilting my head, I told her, “It’s from armored lizards. It’s on the verge of being spoiled, but if you want more from tomorrow on, I can always make jerky for you.”

Her eyes widened further, and she looked at the chunk Khamsin was holding. “Who hunted them?”

I scanned the crowd.

Who was it again? Everyone, I guess, since they all used ballistae?

As it turned out, they were all staring at me...and they gave the same response.

“Lord Van, yeah?”

“Lord Van, certainly.”

“All thanks to Lord Van’s strength.”

My name kept popping up!

“Not really. What about the ballistae?” Much as I protested, the credit was ultimately given to me. It felt like a setup. “Apparently, I hunted the lizards.”

The apkallu blinked her round eyes and studied my face. “I see.”

That was all she said before taking the fruit in my hand and vanishing into the

lake.

“Um...?”

I turned around, a metaphorical question mark hovering over my head, but everyone else was as confused as I was.

The next day, Till stormed in to wake me up from a perfectly cozy sleep.

“L-Lord Van!”

“What is it?!”

The way she threw open the door was so over the top that I sprang up in bed, still half-asleep. Till realized what she had done and knelt on the ground, hanging her head as sweat poured down her face.

“S-sorry! I received a report that we were being attacked, so I panicked!”

“Attacked, you say?”

“Yes! Enemy forces have apparently stopped by the moat!”

“Hrm, that’s not good. That means the ballistae aren’t scaring them off.”

As we discussed matters, Till deftly and briskly changed my clothes. Before even a minute had gone by, I was heading out of my room.

“Let’s go.”

Whoever’s attacking my village has a lot of guts. I’m going to crush them!

I raced up the village wall and peered down at the moat, only to be shocked by what I found. A bunch of apkallu were crowding the moat and waterway.

“Please don’t tell me that the apkallu worship armored lizards as deities or something.”

I glanced at Till, but she just tilted her head, unsure what to say.

Dee, Arb, and Lowe all drew their swords, ready for combat. The villagers took up positions at the ballistae, looking down at the apkallu. Amid this explosive situation, our visitors surfaced up to their shoulders and swam a little closer. The apkallu from yesterday had been a cute child, but these were men and

women of all ages. That said, I didn't see anyone who looked over forty.

Young men, women, and kids were the majority. Everyone had beautiful blue hair and gorgeous features. Granted, their bottom halves were supposedly fishlike, but they weren't visible at the moment. As I looked over all of them, a male in his late thirties gazed up at us.

"I would like to talk, young lad," the male apkallu—mankallu?—said, his eyes fixed on me.

He had a terrifying look in his eyes, so I asked Dee to join me. I was too frightened to talk without a bodyguard. I turned to see who else I could take for protection, but much to my surprise, Bell stepped up.

What's a merchant doing volunteering for guard duty?

"There are apkallu who do business with merchants," he said, a passionate glint in his eye. "They tend to possess rare materials, though I don't know where they get them from. Doing business with the apkallu often leads to big sales."

Well, I'm interested in those materials, so maybe it'll be good to let Bell talk business.

With that in mind, I allowed him to come with me. We lowered the drawbridge, opened the doors, and stepped out of the village. The apkallu were floating in the waterway and moat with only their heads above water.

At a glance, they resembled a bunch of severed heads drifting on the water. It was kind of terrifying.

The male apkallu who'd spoken earlier appeared right next to the bridge. "Thank you for treating my daughter well."

"Your daughter? Oh, you must mean the girl from yesterday."

I assumed she'd told him that she basically got a free meal in someone else's territory. Now I was beginning to see the bigger picture.

He nodded, then narrowed his eyes. "I heard you managed to defeat a group of armored lizards."

"Yeah, something like that," I said, having given up on correcting anyone.

The other apkallu stirred in response, whispers flying to and fro.

“A child like him...?”

“Is he some kind of great mage?”

“He certainly has powerful allies at his side...”

So they can tell Dee, Ortho, and the other adventurers are strong just by looking at them, eh?

While I observed them, the mankallu’s face hardened. “...I recognize you as a hero. You may wed Lada Priora.”

“Pardon?!” My eyes nearly popped out of my head at his sudden declaration.

What’s this mankallu talking about? And who’s Lada Priora...? The girl from yesterday? She isn’t even here right now!

I was in a panic. I desperately hoped my feelings had reached him, but when I peeked at his face, he looked terribly glum.

“Don’t tell me you’re dissatisfied by this... I am Ladavesta, and Lada Priora is my daughter. She is a beautiful girl, and she will only become lovelier with time.”

“That’s great and all, but where is she?”

A deep crease formed between his brows as he pointed behind him. I squinted and just barely saw the apkallu from yesterday—Lada Priora—far off in the distance. She was talking to another child and pointing at the wall.

Put bluntly, she was just a little girl playing with her friend... How had marriage entered the picture?

I looked back at Ladavesta, who’d strangely been glaring at me. “The Lada Clan has long gone without connections to the human world. However, in recent years, armored lizards have turned the river where we live into their watering hole. As such, Lada Priora requires a strong husband.”

“I-I see.”

I nodded. There had been a lot of scary monsters around as of late, so the leader just wanted to make his people safe by buddying up with a strong

human. To sweeten the deal, he was basically offering up his daughter. It was like one of those political marriages from the Sengoku period. This kind of thing was fairly common among the nobility, but I never got any offers. For obvious reasons.

“Since you are to be her husband, we shall move our clan closer to you. Do you own this watering hole?”

“Uh, you mean the moat? Well, we actually have a lake in the back. Could you head there instead? If you stay here, you’ll have to deal with the drawbridge, and if we get any guests or merchants, they might be startled by it.”

Ladavesta nodded and led his clanmates toward the lake.

Umm, did I just acknowledge his proposal?

“Wait a sec! I’m not getting married! I’ll protect you guys without getting married!” I declared, but the apkallu dove underwater and didn’t respond.

Did I get through to them?

Bell came up to me, beaming. “Hey! Erm, if you get any rare materials, please consider coming to my shop!”

“O-okay, I get it. If that happens, I will,” I replied, inching away from him.

“What an unbelievable day,” Bell said to himself, clearly moved.

The villagers were still unclear as to what had transpired, and they were making a real racket.

“This *is* an incredible stroke of luck...” Esparda mulled over the situation and let out a groan. “I certainly didn’t expect that your first fiancée would be an apkallu. Quite frankly, even I cannot predict how this will be received.”

I desperately wanted to ask if this betrothal was set in stone. I turned to Till for help, but she was looking away from me with a complicated expression.

“If this is your decision, I...”

She’s super unhappy about this! But I made sure to say I didn’t want to get married! This has to be considered a failed proposal, right?!

With that in mind, I went off to the lake to check on things. The apkallu had

already taken over. The adults were now hanging out near the bank, chatting away, while the children were swimming and having fun in the middle of the lake. It was a remarkably peaceful scene, so what was with my feeling of ennui?

“Well, since I decided to be buddies with them, I need to stay true to my word,” I said. Then I addressed Esparda: “Could you widen the left and right sides? We’re going to reshape it like a boathouse.”

“I see... In other words, a house that can fit boats inside it?”

“Yeah, exactly. When you get off the boat, it’s like going up to the second floor of a house. Even when things get stormy, you can store the boat in the house, so it’s very useful.”

Esparda seemed to catch my meaning and was suitably impressed. “I have never heard of such domiciles in the Kingdom of Scuderia. Is it a style common in maritime nations? You are truly incredible, Lord Van. You possess knowledge that even I do not have. I see you have been studying behind my back.”

“Uh, c’mon. Let’s hurry up and get this over with. Oh, and Khamsin? Could you get some other folks to help carry some wood blocks here? I need quite a few.”

“Got it! I’ll have the villagers help out!”

And so the lake ended up with two rest stops.

The apkallu were very pleased by this development. Many of the adults paid frequent visits, to the point that I was told they were a bit cramped. I set up a defensive wall in the back, and I thought about making another boathouse there as well.

Setting aside any future plans, I finally installed another set of doors and a drawbridge in the back of the village, so people no longer had to exit in order to circle around. Because of this adjustment, the villagers were now slowly beginning to communicate and socialize with the apkallu, letting go of their initial fear.

As we shared our crops and meat with the apkallu, we found that they were quite upright folks, and they returned the favor with all kinds of ore. If I sold that stuff to Bell, we’d make a real profit. Granted, Bell’s savings seemed

minimal at best, but I opted not to concern myself with that.

At this point, the village no longer resembled what it used to be, but since everyone seemed happy, that was fine with me.

I wanted to make the village's second wall something powerful and sturdy befitting a fortified city. With that in mind, I gathered materials and talked things over with Esparda.

"Looking forward, I think we should anticipate becoming a 10k city and building a fortress," he told me.

"What's a 10k city?" I asked with a tilt of my head.

Apparently, a 10k city was a city in which ten thousand people lived. Our current population was about two hundred, including the apkallu.

"Wouldn't that be a little big?"

Esparda shook his head. "Considering how quickly this village is developing, ten thousand is too small. However, if we create a perimeter wall, we'll have to manage it, and we'll need quite a few people to guard it. As such, things might get a little tight, but I think we should anticipate this sort of growth."

He spoke as if he were a secretary discussing the day's schedule, but the words coming out of his mouth were so wild that I could barely make sense of them.

The capital had a population of three hundred thousand. The largest city in Fertio territory was two hundred thousand strong. The second-largest city had one hundred thousand; other locations ranged from ten thousand to fifty thousand.

Even if my village went through rapid development, there weren't *that* many people who could end up moving here. In the Three Kingdoms period of China, there were cities with five hundred thousand people, but I'd yet to hear of any places like that in this world. Was Esparda really implying that some ten thousand people were going to move to this tiny village of two hundred people in the boonies?

Come one, come all! Enjoy a nice, slow life out here in the boonies! Nah, we aren't even at "slow life" tier anymore, so how many people would really go out of their way to come here?

"Isn't one or two thousand more realistic?"

I tried to offer a more grounded number, but Esparda grimaced. "No. I guarantee you we will end up with more work that way. And if that is the case, we are better off planning for explosive growth from the start."

I hummed thoughtfully. Esparda was famous for being stubborn. He may have been our head butler for many years and the most skilled person at bringing out the best in his employer, but when it came to sharing his opinion, he never backed down—not even against my father.

"All right. In that case, how about we build the second wall a hundred meters out from the first one?"

"Not nearly enough. If we were only discussing residences, perhaps. But when we include defensive structures, inns, space for the guilds...it should be at least six hundred meters out."

"Excuse me?!"

Considering the current scale of the village, that was a size I couldn't even begin to imagine. Plus, we were planning on building a proper village wall, which meant it needed to be ten meters tall or more.

When I began to think about how I had to make that, I could feel myself zoning out. Esparda noticed the gloom cross my face and nodded deeply.

"We will truly begin constructing the village wall once enough people have gathered under you and we've acquired the proper manpower. For the time being, I believe we should focus on a defensive wall that will be easy to modify."

"So we're still making a wall, then..."

He wasn't going to back down.

I sighed and let my gaze drop to the simple map that Arb and Lowe had drawn up. It was pretty crude, given that the knights had sketched it out with no sense of scale. That said, it was enough for me to get the lay of the land.

The spot where the road stopped was our village. Behind that was the artificial lake, then the woods, then the mountains. The areas to the left and right were open, but then there were more woods and rivers beyond that. We needed to design the front for defense against knights and bandits, with all other sides readied against monsters. The former would take large numbers and a variety of potential attacks into account, while the latter needed to be able to take big hits.

Perhaps playing with the shape is an option.

“How about we move away from a rectangular perimeter?” I asked.

Esparda raised an eyebrow. “You mean going with a circular one? Until one hundred years ago, that design was fairly popular—but with the rise of powerful mages, more and more fortified cities were breached at a single point. As a result, things shifted to rectangular shapes that were easier to protect.” His polite explanation was intended to express the merits of the rectangular shape.

I nodded along, but I ultimately disagreed. “If we were only being attacked from the front, then sure, we could manifest the full power of a rectangular perimeter. But the corners are weak. I suppose we *could* strengthen the walls so they’d fare better than a round design.”

“Are you suggesting we get rid of the corners?” Esparda seemed confused, so I shook my head.

“Nope. We add more.”

Esparda stiffened, trying to parse my vague response.

I went on to explain my idea, drawing a six-pointed star on the map. “I’m thinking we should go with this star shape.”

“Goodness, this is... Wouldn’t the areas facing the roadside be difficult to defend, as you pointed out earlier?” Esparda asked, somewhat baffled.

To make my vision easier to understand, I continued to draw on the map. In each dip between the six points of the star, I drew smaller, standalone triangles.

“You could destroy these standalone structures, but you still wouldn’t be able to enter the city. Think of it as if there were six independent fortresses outside

the wall. The roofs of these external points would connect back to the wall, but we could completely section them off if we set up a drawbridge between them. An attacking force would have to spend time taking over a corner before they could ever reach the city. If they just tried to destroy one of the points, they'd be under attack from three different directions."

Esparda silently stewed in thought.

This fortress concept came into existence on Earth right when guns and cannons became more prominent, but it would be effective even in a world of swords and sorcery. As long as there wasn't any long-range projectile magic—akin to firing mortars—we'd be fine. Asking Esparda to understand all of this was cruel, in a way.

I was about to explain things further when he beat me to the punch.

"I see."

"Huh?" I cocked my head to the side as he pointed down at the map.

"If we were attacked from the front, the enemy would face a focused counterattack. If they came at a corner, they wouldn't be able to spread out to either side, so they would have to conquer multiple fortresses at once... This is extremely well-thought-out. Even a powerful mage wouldn't be able to hide behind the infantry. They would have to conquer our fortresses at the risk of dying in combat, and then..." Esparda began to mutter to himself while staring at the map.

"Would you care for more tea, my lord?" Till asked, evidently noticing the lull in our conversation.

"Ah, that'd be great. Thank you."

The tea she served was delicious and smooth. It reminded me of black tea or fruit tea, and it was so very soothing.

Shortly after my break began, I heard the sound of thundering footsteps inside the manor.

Is that Khamsin? Man, the sound really echoes through the building. What is going on with the sound absorption here? Who built this place?!

As I grumbled internally, the door to my office burst open.

“Lord Van!”

Much to my surprise, it was Arb who appeared. Knights weren’t supposed to be running in the halls.

“What’s up?”

Arb pointed outside, eyes wide open. “An envoy of Lord Ferdinatto has arrived!”

“Huh?” I tilted my head as Lowe poked his head out from behind Arb.

“That’s not all!” Lowe added. “They’ve brought about a hundred soldiers and three carriages! On top of that, they’re flying not only Lord Ferdinatto’s windmill and sword crest but *also* Lady Cayenne’s unicorn and shield crest. She’s part of the count’s faction and an up-and-coming noble!”

I glanced at Till and Esparda. “Uh, we haven’t done anything to stand out, have we?”

“We’ve done more than enough to make ourselves known,” Esparda said, “but that information should not have done the rounds just yet. It would be far too soon.”

“Yeah, I figured... Hm?”

After nodding at his vague response, I stopped to mull things over—but I couldn’t keep our guests waiting. Much as I wanted to hear more from Esparda, we didn’t have the time. I relocated to the parlor to receive our guests on the second floor.

The room was furnished with a low table sandwiched between two sofas, but since there were three carriages, it was possible that there’d be more than three people.

I should change the setup a little. But if I arrange four seats on their side and they send fewer, would that look bad?

I wasn’t sure what to do. Esparda, Dee, and Khamsin would be standing, so I’d be the only one seated on my side. Till was busy hurriedly preparing some light snacks and tea.

I probably should have asked the number of people coming.

Struggling with this admittedly ridiculous problem, I heard a knock at the door. I stopped overthinking things right then and there.

“Come in,” I said.

In the end, I sat right in the middle of the sofa and waited. I was just a lord with no peerage, so sitting down might be a mistake depending on who I was dealing with, but I figured I’d make that call once I saw who my visitors were. I was just a kid, so I’d be sucked up like helium gas if I let them underestimate me.

I was ready to go as the door slowly opened, and in came a beautiful woman in her mid-twenties and an adorable girl who looked to be about ten. The woman was tall and slender, with an incredible figure overall. Her blonde hair cascaded down in waves.

To put it simply, she was the perfect image of the American dream girl.

The young girl had a somewhat gloomy air about her, as though she were dogged by misfortune. Her hair was white, her skin pale. She peeked up from beneath her lashes and slouched in her seat, which told me that she lacked confidence. I wondered if that worried expression on her face was just her default look. As I continued to study her, I started to worry that maybe she was being bullied.

What am I, her dad or teacher or something?! And wait, was sitting down the right choice...?

I honestly couldn’t tell with these two, but since they’d sent a child my way, she probably wasn’t what she appeared to be. I rose to my feet.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Van Nei Fertio. I have been entrusted with this village as its lord.”

Once I’d introduced myself, the gorgeous pair dipped their heads politely, and the woman put a hand to her chest.

“My name is Panamera Carrera Cayenne. I was recently granted the title of viscount,” she said, flashing an indomitable smile. “I’m an upstart from a family

of knights, if you will.”

Even though it sounded like she was belittling herself, I could feel the confidence oozing off of her. It made sense enough. She’d given me the short and sweet version, but to go from a knight to a baron to a viscount was something no normal person could do. This American dream girl was clearly skilled. And smart, to boot.

By contrast, the white-haired girl with seemingly zero confidence hesitated to speak. “I-I am Lord Ferdinatto’s youngest daughter, Arte On Ferdinatto... Um, after hearing that a member of Lord Fertio’s family had come, my father, Lord Bariatt Shirocco Ferdinatto asked me to come here to greet you, and so here I am. I-It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

After she finished her unsteady self-introduction, Arte offered a deep curtsy.

So basically, Lord Ferdinatto was like, “Ah, the son of my rival, Lord Fertio, has been sent out to the middle of nowhere? All right, then I’ll send my expendable youngest daughter out to see what’s going on!” Is that it? But then why would Panamera be here?

When I snuck a glance at the viscount, I found her staring me down with the eyes of a lioness. She was downright scary. I had them sit with me for the moment, but Panamera was giving me the opposite of friendly vibes. If anything, it felt like she was trying to discern my intentions.

Then I realized something. Though it might have been on the king’s orders, my father had torn a chunk of Lord Ferdinatto’s territory away from him. He must have harbored both anger and fear toward the marquis.

That was why he was curious as to why the super genius boy Van had been sent to the middle of nowhere. He was probably wondering if this sad state of affairs I was stuck in was in fact all part of my father’s master plan. He was afraid of a surprise attack coming from the middle of nowhere, hence his sending a powerful envoy like Panamera along with his daughter.

Having come to a solid conclusion, I looked up at my guests and smiled. “Thank you so much for coming all this way to our little village. We are extremely grateful. It is truly wonderful to have you here.”



Arte's shoulders sank as some of her tension melted away.

Panamera, on the other hand, bared her teeth in a grin. "Far as I can tell, you're a little younger than Lady Arte, yet you're quite composed. I mean no disrespect, but why do you think we're here, Lord Van?"

She shot straight from the hip. In fact, she was so direct that I couldn't help but smile wider.

"This is just a guess, but probably to observe the 'enemy's' movements and figure out how to win me over," I said simply.

Panamera's mouth popped open, and a cackle spilled from her lips. "Bah ha ha ha ha! Amazing, Lord Van! Incredible that a boy who's barely even ten could be so astute! Your guess is right on the mark!"

I wasn't sure what she found so hilarious, but Panamera continued to laugh as she explained the situation a little too openly.

"You see, Lord Ferdinatto struggled to figure out the marquis's intentions. Everyone in the know had their attention on who would be his successor, and two years ago, your name kept coming up. Normally, at eight, you'd have your magical aptitude appraised and then have a reveal party, prompting you to draw even more attention to yourself. But you were a peculiar case."

She paused, examining me.

"I'm assuming your magic aptitude ended up being none of the four elements. Even then, I can't understand why you'd be made lord of a no-name village in the sticks. Rumor had it that you were a genius. You should've received top-tier education in matters of governance, then worked to develop the marquis's region. That is precisely why your placement here—where your land borders the county and the Kingdom of Yelenetta—is so suspicious."

I had no idea what she was thinking, giving me all this information. Whatever the truth of my placement, digging up dirt on high-class nobles in the same nation was off limits. As was trying to crush one another. Yet Panamera was blatantly discussing things that would qualify her for punishment. She was certainly odd for a noble.

Is she telling me these things to see how I'll respond?

Arte sat quietly on her side, a vacant expression on her face.

"Well, I suppose there's no point in hiding it," I said at last. "You're right, I have no aptitude for any of the four elements. As for your other concerns, no need to worry. I was simply chased out of my own home."

I smiled sheepishly, and Panamera stared at me for what felt like ages.

Then she jerked to her feet and let out a deep sigh. "So that's it, huh? How boring. I guess the rumors about you being a genius were just that. Rumors."

"Are you implying my father has some *plan* for me here?" I spat, annoyed.

I had been singled out and exiled from my one and only home in one fell swoop—there was no doubt about that. My father was just a big jerk. I was still grateful toward my eldest brother, though.

Panamera opened one hand with an exasperated look on her face. "How do you not realize this? I figured it out the second I got here. I heard this was a village of barely standing shacks that could blow away at any given moment. A village of a hundred at best. Yet—in what, one or two months?—it has a wall around the perimeter, and all the buildings are brand new and made out of who knows what. A butler with years of experience works in the lord's manor, and well-trained knights are posted outside."

She glanced at Arte, who said nothing.

"At the very least, you must have been sent here with five thousand men. Whatever tech you used to make this without our knowledge makes this place quite the threat. And the fact that your father had this all done knowing it might be discovered... But why? Because he expects great things from you. To make this place into a new military base." She watched me, waiting.

"Pfft..."

I couldn't hold back my laughter after hearing her gigantic misunderstanding of the situation.

This was a bad one. This was a decidedly not-good direction to be headed in. Yet I couldn't stop laughing because of how absurd it all was. And the fact that

it all made sense from the outside looking in made it even funnier.

“*What* is so funny?” she growled.

The viscount was on high alert now, bracing herself for a fight. She must’ve assumed that she would be assassinated for revealing her intentions. As Panamera’s brimming bloodlust reached our side, Dee subtly lowered himself into a crouch, and Khamsin gripped the hilt of his sword.

“Bah ha ha ha ha!”

The more serious and grave the situation became, the more uncontrollable my laughter. This was bad. Everyone’s eyes were on me, but I had to let it all out.

“Ha ha... Whew. Sorry for the outburst,” I said after some time. I still had a smile on my face, but I was at least calmer than before.

Panamera eyed me with suspicion, whereas Arte seemed concerned. Esparda, Dee, and Khamsin were all focused on the viscount, but there would be no skirmishes here. Though I hadn’t done it on purpose, my laughter had completely put a nail in the coffin of all the tension from before. I was really something else!

I reined in my smile and spoke directly to Panamera. “Now then, I believe it’s time to correct your misunderstanding.”

“Excuse me?” She scowled, and I nodded.

“The only ones who were permitted to join me were Khamsin—that boy there—and Till, my maid. I also received essentially zero financial assistance.”

Panamera narrowed her eyes. “Then who’s the butler? And those knights? The two posted outside are clearly your men.”

Dee interjected before I could respond. “We followed Lord Van of our own accord, you see. We declared ourselves his bodyguards and left with him. In fact, just the other day I received notice from the commander of the Chivalric Order to return immediately. I ignored it, of course,” he said with a joyful smile.

That’s nothing to smile about!

“Uh, shouldn’t you head back? You’re going to be kicked out of the order,” I

told him, but he was jovial as ever.

I looked on, exasperated, as Esparda offered his own contribution. “As you can see, I’m already quite old. When I heard Lord Van would be sent to the middle of nowhere, I thought it was about time for me to retire. Let us just say it is a hobby of mine to impart all of my knowledge to Lord Van.”

His hobby can be a real pain. It’s more like harassment.

I wanted to complain, but recently my time in Esparda’s “classes” had gone down to about one hour a day, so it wasn’t actually that bad. And since Dee was teaching swordplay to the children in the village, his training sessions with Khamsin and me had decreased as well.

Didn’t change the fact that I was doing both every day, though. Heck, today I’d be training in the evening and studying after dinner. The thought made me grimace.

Panamera tossed out one more question, an unreadable expression on her face. “...Then how do you explain the changes in the village?”

“Easier to show you. Let’s go!” I answered.

“Hrm? Where to?”

“Outside. As it so happens, I was planning on building a new outer wall.”

Panamera stood up silently, prompting Arte to do so as well, albeit in a much more panicked fashion.

I took them outside, where their soldiers were lined up perfectly. They all spun toward us at once. Or toward Panamera, specifically. While keeping an eye on them, I made my way to the front entrance of the village. Panamera trailed behind me and gave an order to the soldiers.

“I’m heading out to observe his work. Follow five meters behind us in formation.”

That was enough to get the troops to speedily get back in line and follow behind us.

The villagers were crowding nearby to see what all the fuss was about, so I offered them a wave in lieu of my usual greeting. I had not just a noble child

behind me but a bona fide noble as well. It would be rude of me to chat with the villagers in front of them.

Though I'd be pushing it a little, I would at least smile at the children if they spoke to me. In noble society, higher-class nobles were always given priority. It was all so annoying.

Realizing I didn't have enough materials, I asked one of the villagers, "Could you guys carry over some wood blocks for me?" They agreed and quickly ran off to get help.

Well done.

We passed through the entrance and across the drawbridge. Once we'd proceeded down the road a ways, Panamera was finally annoyed enough to say, "How far are we going?"

I figured she had her doubts. I mean, I *had* brought her out here without explaining why. I stopped in my tracks, checked our surroundings, and looked at Esparda.

"Around here?"

"Let me see... If we're talking about one side of the hexagon, then this should be fine. The point will be a little farther out."

"Gotcha. Then let's make it about two meters in width so that we can correct it later."

"As you wish."

I turned back to Panamera. "Okay, we're gonna make the wall now."

"...Now?"

I locked eyes with Esparda as Panamera looked on in surprise. He offered a silent affirmation, then did a ten-second chant to activate his magic. Right off to the side of the road, the ground rose up, forming a giant earthen wall. It was about two meters wide, at least five meters thick, and about ten meters tall.

"Hrm, I see... So you're a retired mage skilled in one of the four elements. But once the magic fades, this wall will collapse," Panamera pointed out.

I turned to the new wall and placed my palm on it. Probably because it was made from the ground below it, the wall contained not just dirt and stone, but bones, volcanic rock, and some ore as well. There were all kinds of materials I could fuse together. I wanted to try for real concrete, but I lacked the specific materials for that. As such, this was a bit of a stopgap.

Once the wall had hardened, I took a wood block that the villagers had brought for me.

“Is that what you used to build the houses?” Panamera asked, looking on with great curiosity.

I quickly fused the blocks together and produced a gate in one go. I would add the metal coating later. For now, I focused on its form and toughness. Spectacular wood block craftsman that I was, I could produce a double gate five meters tall in only ten minutes. It took five minutes to make the base form, and the rest of the time was spent spiffing it up.

I would connect the upper part to the opposite side of the wall later. This was enough for now.

“All right, that should be good,” I said to myself, whirling back to face my audience.

Panamera and Arte were gawking at the brand-new doors in absolute bafflement.

Chapter 9:

The Threat of Van

EVEN THE WELL-ORDERED TROOPS WERE WATCHING on with widened eyes and open mouths like a bunch of fools. Arte was the one to break the silence, confused as she might have been.

“What magical aptitude do you possess, Lord Van?”

Panamera snapped to her senses. “R-right. What was that just now? How could you do something like this? Just who exactly are you...?” She still seemed bewildered, but she’d mustered up enough willpower to calmly ask her questions.

I shrugged and gave a nonchalant smile. “Unfortunately, I have an aptitude for production magic. All I can do is make things.”

The viscount’s eyes widened even more as she looked back at my creation. “I don’t understand what’s ‘unfortunate’ about being able to make something like that. This power of yours is a threat. You could build an entire base in a month if you wanted to. The marquis must have realized as much, and he’s planning to use that power to storm Ferdinatto County...”

“Oh, actually, my father knows nothing about this power. As soon as he saw I couldn’t command one of the elements, he threw me out of the house.”

Panamera narrowed her eyes, clearly exasperated, then sighed. “How absurd. What an incredibly wasteful choice. With this power, the marquis could see overwhelming growth unheard of before now... But I suppose one wouldn’t think to use it so brazenly without understanding it first.” Brow furrowed, she murmured, “I cannot believe production magic mages held such possibilities. I never could have imagined it.”

I pointed back to the village. “Shall we return? We’ll continue the wall building tomorrow.”

She nodded, her expression complicated. “Fair enough. I would have loved to

see you construct the wall, but I suppose it's for the best."

Thank goodness.

I was glad the misunderstanding was cleared up...but she bombarded me with all sorts of questions on the way back to the manor.

"Did you build all of the houses by yourself? Even that wonderful drawbridge? Are there any other production magic mages here? What was that material you used? How strong is it?"

I gave a short answer to each question right up until we arrived back at the manor. We sat across from each other, and I was the first to speak.

"Now then, I hope you understand that I was not given this land as part of Lord Fertio's master plan."

Panamera brought a hand to her chin and let out a groan. "Indeed. I cannot wrap my head around it, but I understand now. I was told by Lord Ferdinatto to offer Lady Arte's hand in marriage if that was why you were given the land, but..." Her gaze slid over to Arte.

Now I get it. If they really did deem me a threat, Panamera would've stepped in with her authority as viscount, offering me the count's daughter to keep me from becoming their enemy.

Granted, this was one of the outcomes I'd anticipated, so I wasn't particularly shocked.

"Well, it's not uncommon for powerful monsters to appear in this land, so I plan on strengthening our village wall and developing this village even further. That said, I have no intention of going to war with anyone, nor do I want to. As long as you and yours understand that, I'm beyond satisfied," I said, placing utmost emphasis on my words.

A deep wrinkle formed in Panamera's brow. "It is clear to me that this village will continue to grow. If anything, I am fascinated by this place." With a wolfish smile, she added, "And that includes you as well, Lord Van."

After a moment, she continued, "On a personal level, I am quite attached to Lady Arte, you see. When I heard the count planned on marrying her off, I was

opposed. Especially since her potential partner might be our enemy. Moreover, her fiancé was to be a youngest son, placed in charge of a border land at such a young age. I thought it highly likely that you would be a talentless hack, forever trapping Lady Arte in a miserable life.”

“I get that. She would endure poor treatment from our people, or scrape by with no money and no supplies in the middle of nowhere, or eventually fall victim to bandits or monsters along with the rest of the village.”

I agreed with Panamera, rattling off additional tragic futures that could befall the good lady. Arte’s complexion worsened by the second.

When I thought about it, I realized that perhaps the reason Arte had looked so gloomy from the get-go was that she was already set to throw away her life. Maybe she was lamenting her cruel fate. In that sense, we were two birds of a feather. I understood where she was coming from.

As Arte blanched, I nodded for Panamera to go on.

The viscount crossed her arms and gave a jerk of her chin. “Precisely. I came here with every intention of using a variety of reasons to not wed her off—but my thoughts on the matter have changed. I would be all *for* her marrying you, Lord Van. I know you might be a bit younger, but you’re practically the perfect candidate. You have forethought unheard of in a child, patience, compassion for your people and workers... Even after being sent to such a miserable place, you had such a uniting power about you that people followed you here. You have the wisdom and force of will to flip the script on your own misfortune. Additionally, you have powers as a mage that no one had ever even considered.” A mischievous smile rose to her lips. “Were I closer in age, I might have offered my own hand.”

She was complimenting me like mad, and quite frankly, it was thrilling. In mere moments, my rating of her skyrocketed.

Miss Panamera, please praise me more!

I was so happy I could dance, but I schooled my expression into calm.

Panamera sized me up, looking elated, then shifted her focus to Arte. “What do you think, Lady Arte? I personally can’t imagine a better partner. All that’s

left is for the both of you to agree.”

Arte gripped her skirt tightly with both hands. “I-I... I think Lord Van is a good person... B-but I still do not know him well...”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. Talking about marriage at the age of ten was probably a bit much.

I offered a pained smile. “I mean, there’s no need to rush, right? Plus, right now I don’t have the time to think about marriage.”

Though I kept my tone light, Panamera snorted. “You managed to develop your village this much in such a short amount of time. Your accomplishments are such that this place will draw a ton of attention based on rumors alone. When that happens, it will grow even further. If that’s the case, why not aim for greater heights?”

“And you think that would be possible if I marry Lady Arte?”

“Obviously. Based on what you told me, you’ve received no support from your family, correct? Were you to marry Lady Arte, you could count on Lord Ferdinatto providing you with support going forward. And most importantly, I would provide aid as well. I cannot say this publicly, but the likelihood of Lord Ferdinatto’s knights invading in the hopes of taking back the land would drop to zero.”

She raised both hands as if to say *How about that for merits?*

Something about this smelled fishy to me. The more she talked, the more I realized there were nothing *but* merits—which made it all seem like BS.

This was the ideal political marriage. I’d have fewer enemies and greater allies. If it resulted in financial gains, all the better. That being said, there was something that ate at me: What did Lord Ferdinatto have to gain from this deal? Certainly having a connection to me wouldn’t be enough. The count had only offered up his daughter under the impression that I had come here under my father’s orders. As things stood, there was no reason for us to be wed.

I cast a suspicious glance at Panamera, who grinned and let out a deep breath. “Looks like our positions have been flipped,” she said, elegantly leaning back in her seat. Her gaze told me she was testing me. “I plan on staying here

tonight. Use this time to think long and hard about this proposal. If you wish to inquire further, you may speak to me or Lady Arte. In the end, I'm doing this because I want to, so you might not find anything all that interesting."

"Say what? You're crashing here?!" I blurted out, completely losing my cool. It was incredibly rude to speak this way to a viscount, but Panamera was the one at fault here.

"Bwa ha ha ha! I finally get to see your true face, Lord Van! And I must say, it makes a good impression, *young man*. You haven't acted your age even once since our arrival!" She grinned, stroking her chin.

"So, will your soldiers also be staying?"

Her expression only made her seem invincible. "Depending on how things go, this could be enemy territory. Which would be terrifying for weak, little old me! I would greatly appreciate it if you allowed my people to stay with me."

"Weak, little old me," my butt. I'm looking at a powerhouse American dream girl. Probably the toughest person I've met since I wound up in this world.

I snuffed out my complaints as Panamera turned to Arte with a kind smile. "What will you do, Lady Arte? If you wish to stay over, you could have Lord Van let you stay at his manor..."

"I-I couldn't possibly sleep together with a man!"

Who said anything of the sort?!

I played straight man to Arte in my heart of hearts. With marriage potentially on the table, it seemed as though she had prepared herself for matters of the bedroom as well. Given how red her ears were, it was clear that even in her ten-year-old mind she was visualizing something provocative.

Because her skin was so pale, her bright-red blush was plain as day.

"How unfortunate, Lord Van. It appears as though Lady Arte is still but a child," the viscount said with a teasing grin. "I'll have her stay with me this time around. Are there any rooms we can use in this manor?"

I let out a deep sigh. "Worry not. I'll make a place for you to stay right away."

Panamera seemed to think I was joking, as she raised her voice and laughed.

“...I did not think you were actually going to build us a place to stay.”

Panamera stared at the two-story building in front of us with a dumbfounded shrug of her shoulders.

“I wasn’t confident I’d have enough materials, so I’m sorry to say that the soldiers have four-person rooms. I’ve prepared private rooms for you and Lady Arte, though. Each has a personal restroom, but the other rooms share one.”

“This is far more than we could have asked for. We came here with the intention of having our soldiers camp outside, so they will be pleased.”

The soldiers entered the building as she ordered them to prepare for the rest of the evening. I made lockers for them to store their stuff, but I wasn’t sure they could fit their giant backpacks in there. Panamera and Arte went off to inspect their lodgings, and I saw them off with my arms crossed.

I hadn’t built each room to be especially large, so their lodgings didn’t actually take up that much room. But even then, I’d still ended up using a fair amount of the open space on the wall side of the village. Regardless of whether our population grew, I would have to continue developing the village walls. As I mulled over the subject, Till spoke up.

“Um, what will everyone be doing for dinner?”

“Right, dinner... For now, how about we serve them some monster meat?”

Till pulled a face at that.

Soon after the apkallu moved in, monsters had appeared on the eastern side of the village. They were forest creatures known as scaled wolves that hunted in packs. At their biggest, they were something like three meters in size, and they had hard scales covering their heads, backs, and legs. Their claws and fangs could tear you apart in a flash. Since they moved in herds of a dozen or more, they were said to be extremely dangerous.

The herd of fifteen that had appeared at our village was on the smaller side, but for some reason, they were all three meters in size.

Needless to say, our local merchant lost his mind.

“Scaled wolf armor, scaled wolf shields, scaled wolf helmets!”

It took one full carcass to make a complete set of equipment for one person, so it was pretty expensive. I tried making a set myself, and Bell was tremendously pleased. He offered me thirty gold for it. However, he didn't have the money anymore, so I let him take an IOU while the equipment stayed at the shop.

After the battle, there was plenty of scaled wolf meat to go around...and boy, was it delicious. I was certain both Panamera and Arte would be thrilled, but Till didn't seem to agree.

“What's wrong?”

Till took a step toward me, dead serious. “Lord Van, I personally would like to see you wed the lovely Lady Arte. Eating only monster meat with her as your first shared meal would be too sad!”

“Wait, you support our betrothal?”

She bobbed her head repeatedly. “Not only is she adorable, but she's also very reserved, which means she won't object to more fringe ideas. She'll stand by you no matter what, I imagine.”

“‘Fringe ideas’...?”

“Yes. Plus, if someone kind were to become your wife, it would be much easier for me to stay by your side.”

“So this is about your work environment, huh? Well, I suppose that *is* important.”

Khamsin nodded. “I also think Lady Arte would be a good match. That said, I would prefer it if you married someone stronger...like Lady Panamera.”

Oooh, so Khamsin's into powerful women, eh? Heh. I'll have to keep that in mind when I find him a romantic partner.

Esparda was the next to speak. “Personally, I believe the viscount speaks the truth. Forgive my boldness, but from the count's perspective, there is...little meaning in wedding you to his daughter. However, considering that he sent her out here with that as a possibility, I believe it's safe to say that Lady Arte...does

not have magical aptitude in one of the four elements.”

He was struggling to get the words out, which was unusual for him. I imagined he found it difficult to outright say that, much like me, she was probably doomed to exile.

I grimaced as Esparda cleared his throat and continued. “Simply put, it is fair to assume that Lady Panamera recognizes and acknowledges your power, Lord Van. As such, I believe her words to be true. Even so, we cannot ignore how things would change should you become engaged to Lady Arte.”

“If anyone from the count’s house or Lady Panamera visited, they would be able to enter the village unimpeded. Also, they will likely have many questions about the ballistae, fortress facilities, weapons, and equipment. Oh, and they’d form a connection with the apkallu, right?”

Esparda nodded. “You’ll also have to speak with your father. This is a marriage proposal coming from the count, who has had less than optimal relations with the marquis. In my opinion, the betrothal will likely fall apart, but there is still a chance.”

“Is that so? Ahh, you mean Father might be aiming for the count’s territory? But wouldn’t that be impossible in this day and age?”

The Kingdom of Scuderia had spent decades expanding its domain, and neighboring nations feared and hated us. Our king, Dino En Tsora Bellrinet, positively loathed infighting.

Esparda shook his head. “There are many ways to take someone’s land from them: defeat in battle, forced poverty to make preservation difficult, sabotage that leads to demotion... All sorts of methods.”

I sighed, eyes narrowing. “Terrifying. Why does everyone have to obsess over getting more land?”

That night, I invited Panamera and Arte to the manor and gave them a warm welcome. I’d spoken to the viscount a great deal, but I’d yet to talk to Arte. During dinner, I made it a point to converse with her. I didn’t know if she had much fun, but she seemed to enjoy the meal quite a bit. When Till heard Arte’s

praise for her cooking, she did a little fist pump in the back.

Afterward, I saw the pair back to their lodgings, with Till and Khamsin tagging along. Since we were moving within the village, Panamera's bodyguards weren't present.

Is this a sign that they trust me?

"It is safe and peaceful here, the meals are delicious, and there are plentiful foods and spices. Above all else, everyone here seems to acknowledge your leadership, Lord Van," Panamera said while looking around the village.

Arte, on the other hand, must have been accustomed to it already; she was sneaking glances my way.

"Is that so?" I replied. "Well, we have Till to thank for the delicious meals—her culinary skills have given the local food culture a huge boost. The villagers have nothing but good things to say."

Panamera smirked. "Oho. How humble of you. If it were me, I would boast loud and proud about my achievements. It would also serve as advertising to the outside world."

"Well, the thing is that the materials for the wall and houses were all prepared by my people and the villagers. The only thing I did was modify them. Should our population grow beyond a thousand, I'll make a list of the things I want to brag about."

"Ha ha ha ha, I am looking forward to that! I shall see you tomorrow!" Panamera said, disappearing into the building.

For some reason, Arte stayed behind.

"Is something the matter, Lady Arte?"

She fidgeted, eyes downcast. "Th-thank you for today. I was very nervous, considering I might be engaged to you, but...um, I'm relieved you are such a kind person. I, erm, hope we can remain on good terms! Good night!"

Arte rushed out the last part, practically shouting, then scampered after Panamera.

"I guess things went well?" I said to myself with a tilt of my head. Having seen

them off, I returned to the manor.

Arte

FROM THE START, I WAS NEVER BLESSED WITH opportunities to speak with my father, and I rarely saw my mother. The reason was simple: I was a failure.

Ever since I was little, I'd been a scaredy-cat, a picky eater, and a poor student. I had no real skills, but if I had to name one thing I was good at, it would be marionette magic. While I wasn't an athlete or a good dancer, I had the peculiar ability to make puppets move beautifully. Despite the fact that I couldn't perform myself, I wondered if I could use this skill to please Mother.

Day after day, I practiced my magic, hoping for a future in which Father and Mother praised me. I controlled a doll the same size as me and made it dance for Mother.

She was downright disgusted by it.

I remembered little of her ranting and raving. I just recalled her slapping my face, grabbing my hair, and dragging me out of the room and into the hall.

"You unruly child!" she'd spat. That line, at least, was seared in my memory.

I had no idea what I'd done to make her so angry, but given how small my world was, her scathing response was unforgettable. No matter what I did, it was never good enough. I lacked confidence, so I never spoke out of turn or did anything for myself.

Children apparently came into their magic talents at the age of eight, so I didn't know much. Only one thing was for certain: the magic I'd thought would make things better was no good.

If anything, it was my magic that sealed my fate. From that day forward, Mother stopped looking at me. I hardly saw Father to begin with, but occasionally I would pass by Mother, and she would simply ignore me. It hurt beyond belief—and it was all my fault, not hers.

I held my breath and suffered in silence. Eventually, I became a ghost in our

house. No one spoke to me, and I spent my days in solitude. Though no one lashed out at me, I would sit alone in my room and cry my eyes out.

Mother must've had high hopes for my magical aptitude. When I revealed that my talents lay elsewhere, I probably made her sad. In that case, I did something truly awful to her. She had given birth to me and expected things from me, yet I did nothing but disappoint her.

What an unruly child I am.

When those words surfaced in my mind, I sobbed. I was so, so sad. My heart bled.

Two months—or perhaps three or six—passed this way. I spent every day in tears, thinking my parents wanted nothing to do with me. Then, for the first time ever, Father summoned me. *Me*. I had no notable characteristics; my body was tiny, I wasn't particularly smart, and I had no talents. So if I was being summoned, it was because I'd lost my place in our family.

I stood in the corner of Father's massive office and waited. At length, he appeared, and it was the first time I'd come face-to-face with him in years. He had gained a little weight since then.

"I-It is a pleasure to see you again, Father..."

I did my best to greet him politely, gripping my skirt with trembling hands. I wondered what he must have thought of his daughter for failing to do something so simple. Terrified, I couldn't bring myself to look at him directly.

But instead of reprimanding me, he addressed a woman who'd entered after me.

"This is the one," he said.

"I see," came the woman's response. "Are you sure I'm the right person for the job? Considering who you're dealing with, sending a summons would be a better idea."

"Nonsense. Think of the time and place. If anything were to happen, losing this *thing* wouldn't harm our house. You will do as I say."

"Understood," the woman said after a moment, sounding unhappy. "But

depending on what he's like, I might bring her back with me."

She padded toward me, and I looked up. She appeared to be strong, but her eyes were gentle.

"Heya, Lady Arte On Ferdinatto. I am a viscount by the name of Panamera Carrera Cayenne. I suppose you've heard about your engagement, yes?"

"Um, I-I have not..." Unsure what else to say, I trailed off.

To my surprise, I didn't anger the viscount at all. "Hrm... If the boy seems talented, he will be your fiancé. If he isn't, I'll turn down the offer myself, so fear not."

"I have to leave...because I'm not needed?"

"You've got it wrong, my dear. All your siblings are already engaged, as you may already know. You are the only one without a partner. Let us hope this boy is a good match."

Lady Panamera reached out and stroked my hair, a dashing grin tugging at her lips. I thought she was going to muss it up, but her touch was gentle. My nose stung, and I did my best to hold back the tears threatening to overflow. Wherever fate would take me, this was the first time in two years I'd met someone who saw me for myself.

The three weeks or so we spent traveling by carriage were the most fun I'd ever had in my life. Lady Panamera was always kicking up a fuss about one thing or another, but she was a kind person. She launched into a furious lecture anytime I called myself useless, but she always hugged me afterward. Again and again, she'd caress my hair and offer soothing words.

I surprised myself with how often I shed tears of joy. Lady Panamera never got upset over it; she just ran her fingers through my hair yet again. I truly loved her hands. They were kind, warm, and magical. I told her as much, and she snorted, saying that they were covered in scars and blisters.

By the time we arrived at the border village, I had no desire to get married off to some lord. I wanted to be with Lady Panamera forever. When I first met the

boy who was to be my partner, I kept him at arm's length. He must've felt the same as I did, given that he spent all his time speaking to my companion. Yet another person who never looked my way, but it didn't bother me one bit. After all, I had Lady Panamera.

Thus, I observed the boy named Van as if he had nothing to do with me.

Lord Van was special, that much was clear. Lady Panamera did not conceal her wariness upon seeing the village, and after meeting Lord Van, her caution only grew. As someone who'd lived my whole life in a castle, I couldn't understand it myself, but apparently this little lord had made the village strong and bountiful.

Deep down, I thought, *That's amazing.*

He was the complete opposite of me. Though he'd only just met Lady Panamera, he held his own in their conversations, and he even had his own subordinates. Surely he could do anything. Surely he lived up to his parents' expectations. He had abundant talent, skills, and confidence. I could feel a detestable envy eating away at me, and it hurt.

Why were we so different? Why was he so blessed?

Dark emotions threatened to consume me—and then the boy started laughing.

“The only ones who were permitted to join me were Khamsin—that boy there—and Till, my maid. I also received essentially zero financial assistance.”

My head snapped up. His words deeply confused me. He made it sound like he was unwelcome in his home, but that couldn't have been the case. If he was treated the same way I was, there was no way he could be this bold. Yet he insisted he'd been chased out of his home.

I watched his profile as he gave a self-deprecating chuckle. He *did* appear to be telling the truth, and I found myself intrigued by this Van Nei Fertio.

After that, he showed us the incredible power of non-elemental magic.

Nobles had a strong, almost religious belief in the four elemental magics, so my aptitude was considered vulgar and low-class. That was why I hadn't

wielded my magic even once since Mother stopped looking my way.

If I had kept up with it, would I have become as skilled as Lord Van?

With such questions building up within me, I dined with him for the first time.

“Lady Arte, is the food to your liking? Once we start getting more supplies in, we’ll be able to make baked goods and snacks as well.”

“Ah, um, the meat, the salad, and the fruits a-are all delicious. I’m so surprised...”

I’d finally grown a bit more used to being around him, though my responses came in fits and starts. It was embarrassing, but oddly enough, Lord Van did not look down on me in contempt. Perhaps he was like Lady Panamera: a kind person. If that was the case, I wouldn’t have many more opportunities to meet someone like this. I decided to try my best.

“What sort of things do you like, Lady Arte?”

“Ah, I-I like cute things...”

“Ooh, wonderful. You mean like small animals?”

“D-dolls, pretty flowers... Um, I like animals if they d-don’t move too much...”

“Dolls, huh? I haven’t seen many of those! If it’s okay with you, would you show me some?”

His way of speaking was so adultlike that it caught me off guard, yet it seemed perfectly natural for him. If anything, he possessed a composure unlike any other. He was full of surprises.

“Y-yes, of course! I-I have them in the carriage! I could show you tomorrow...”

“Really? Thanks!”

He smiled kindly at me, and warmth bloomed in my chest. I was excited and happy; a mysterious feeling to be sure. Heart pounding, I watched him out of the corner of my eye—and that was when I noticed Lady Panamera grinning at me. Embarrassed, I averted my gaze.

Lord Van continued to strike up conversation with me, and I became at ease with our back-and-forths. In fact, I found myself wishing to speak to him more,

but we ran out of time before I could initiate. Dinner had passed in the blink of an eye.

On our way back to the lodgings, I listened to Lord Van and Lady Panamera chitchat. Lord Van smiled and apologized for the improvised housing, although it was a wonderful manor in a style I was wholly unfamiliar with. Since he'd made rooms for our entire party, they were a bit small, but it was all aesthetically pleasing. I looked up at the building and jealousy swirled within me, but I shook my head free of it and let out a sigh.

At that moment, Lady Panamera stepped inside.

My eyes met Lord Van's. I steeled my resolve, and this time I made the first move.



“Th-thank you for today. I was very nervous, considering I might be engaged to you, but...um, I’m relieved you are such a kind person. I, erm, hope we can remain on good terms! Good night!”

I sped through my words as I bid him good night, then fled the scene before he could respond.

Was that rude of me?! Lord Van might think I’m strange... Oh, I don’t even know where my room is. What am I to do?

My head swam as I wandered the hallway half in tears. Even the soldiers were shooting me puzzled looks. Fortunately, I found my way back to the room...only to walk in on Lady Panamera in her lingerie. Even though she was a woman, I found her extremely attractive. Men must’ve loved buxom figures like hers.

Lady Panamera chugged some kind of clear liquid out of a beautiful wooden cup, then turned to me. “Oho, you’ve finally arrived. So, did the two of you throw caution to the wind and cross the line together? If you’ve done the deed, let me know. You have my full support.”

“A-absolutely not!” I blurted out, borderline screeching. I clapped both my hands over my face.

She flashed me an impish grin. “The plan was to return tomorrow, but what do you say to staying a few more days? Obviously, we can’t keep staying here for free, so let’s give them enough gold to cover our party. Wait, no—we’ll run out of funds in three days. In that case, let us pay a hundred gold for the week,” Lady Panamera said gleefully, and I nodded.

When I saw Lord Van tomorrow, I would make it a point to start a conversation. He would most certainly listen. For the first time in ages, I was excited for another day to come.

I washed off in the bath, then climbed into bed. It was much more comfortable than I’d expected, and the soft blankets enveloped me in warmth.

Panamera

AS FAR AS CONDITIONS WENT, THEY WERE FINE. THEY were vague, certainly, but I left for the village after setting my own standards.

When the village first came into view, I was pleasantly surprised—the place had potential. It was a far cry from what I'd been told. Not only was it better defended than your average town, but the wall surrounding it was also brand new. I didn't know what it was made from, but a marquis had all sorts of connections; he'd probably procured whatever he needed to beef up security. It was safe to say that this area would eventually become a fortified city or even a stronghold.

Fearing the marquis's power, the count had opted to offer up his daughter to prevent war. We needed to confirm the betrothal and make it public as soon as possible. If nothing else, I hoped that we were dealing with the marquis's youngest son, the one who had been doted on. As long as he and Arte got along, we could push the marriage through.

That said, I was against it from the start.

If the count was that wary of the marquis's movements, the marquis surely had no reason for concern. In that case, he had no need to tie their families together, and would instead snatch away the count's territory by force. If Arte got married in this situation, she'd have no ground to stand on.

The girl was ill-fated as it was, but in this case, she would experience living hell. That would leave a bad taste in my mouth. If Arte's betrothal would have caused her family to flourish, then it would've meant something. But if things went the way I expected, her sacrifice would be meaningless.

"I don't like this."

Agitated, I griped aloud and gazed out at the sturdy village. If we were just going to butter up the marquis, I would rather go to war and accept the consequences. But at the end of the day, I had been recognized as a commander and given the chance to achieve great things. I had a debt to repay for that.

It is what it is.

I forced myself to think that as I passed through the front doors, looking to meet and observe the marquis's son. When I finally came face-to-face with him, I found a relaxed boy with little ambition. Quite frankly, he was a letdown.

But the more I spoke to him, the less childlike he seemed. Not just in the way he spoke, but in his responses and his thoughtfulness. Then there was the fact that he said he received no aid from his family, as well as his miraculous production magic.

Fascinating. No one's ever thought to use magic this way before.

This boy would truly become something in the future. He might even surpass his own father. In this warmongering world, foreign nations might even try to recruit him to their side.

I'd completely changed my mind after just half a day.

I had to make sure Arte and the boy became engaged. For her, he was the best possible partner. For him, his status would rise through his engagement to a count's daughter—especially to those who weren't privy to the details. The people around the boy would believe that the count saw him as someone with a bright future. Once that happened, rumors of his territory would spread, and people would gather here in droves.

As the one who'd made it all happen, I would gain a connection.

This is excellent.

A new wind was blowing. I would get the job done in three—no, two weeks. I watched Arte chat bashfully with Van, a smirk lifting the corners of my lips.

Chapter 10:

Village Defense

“BUILDING A PERIMETER WALL IS THE SAME AS building a defensive wall. It’s all done under Esparda’s lead. Well, this is our second go-round, so I’m pretty sure we can get through this without any confusion. We’re talking about a much bigger wall this time, so let’s take things easy to make sure nobody gets hurt. Dee, you and your men go get materials. Any strong folks, go help them out, okay? Ortho, what do you and your party want to do?”

After lazily issuing orders, I looked at the adventurers, who—for some reason—had come for the morning assembly.

Ortho eyed the lined-up villagers with fascination. “Nah, I was just thinking about what a sight this is... The villagers are lining up all orderly these days, like soldiers. Oh, and we’ll be going monster hunting. Thanks to the weapons you made us, it’s been a blast.”

I nodded at his favorable impressions. “If you get any low-quality monster parts, I’ll take them off your hands again. You can sell the good stuff to Bell.”

“Roger that.” He and his party stepped in line with the villagers.

With a smile, I scanned the crowd. “All right, folks. Take care not to get injured. Let’s get to work! By the way, today is Friday.

Tomorrow and the day after, we’ll be having a huge barbecue with the meat we’ve saved up, so give it your all!” I polished off my speech with a fist pump.

Everyone threw their arms into the air and roared with determination.

“Let’s gooo!”

“Time to work!”

“Barbecue!”

When I first got here, I would’ve said that most of the villagers were fairly quiet folks, but now they’d become real party people. I watched as they

scurried off to their various workstations, with Esparda and Dee leading the way.

Once everyone had departed, Panamera came up to me. Arte trailed after her, and their soldiers followed behind in formation.

“Good morning,” the viscount said. “Quite the fascinating way of encouraging your workers. They may not be going to battle, but you did well in raising their morale.”

“Good morning! Yeah, I mean, they aren’t an army. Things are nice and lax around here. By the way, the ten people who put in the most effort get to drink more. They’ll be given tankards instead of small wooden cups. The real tipplers always work the hardest!”

It was the old “carrot and the stick” plan.

Panamera burst into laughter, which I took to be a good thing. “That does make sense. I’d be working my tail off with the rest of them.” She flashed a grin.

Arte trotted over from the side. She seemed oddly upset as she dipped into a curtsy. “G-good morning, Lord Van. Ah, um, lovely weather today, isn’t it? I think today will be a good day.”

“Hm? Oh, right, good morning. You sure seem energetic today, Lady Arte. Did you sleep well after your long journey?” A bit overwhelmed, I tried to match her enthusiasm.

Arte snuck a peek at me and nodded. “Y-yes, I am in quite good spirits. May I observe you while you work?”

“Sure, absolutely. Today I’m going to be reinforcing the water circulation.” I smiled, turning on my heel—only to see Till and Khamsin glowering at me.

“Don’t tell me we’re working with sewer water again...”

They watched me with looks of concern. When I nodded, their heads drooped.

My smile went taut. “Someone has to do the dirty work, right? If you’re not down for it, I can do it myself.”

The pair jerked up straight in a fluster, shaking their heads.

“N-no, it’s fine!”

“We couldn’t possibly let you do such work alone... If anything, I volunteer to do it myself!”

“Khamsin, your magical aptitude isn’t suited for this kind of work.”

Smiling, we made our way to the area behind the protective wall on the entrance side of the village. Behind us were Panamera and Arte with their soldiers in tow. We had nothing to hide, but this was dirty work. On the flip side, this would probably do away with Esparda’s concerns about the effects of our marriage.

I chuckled dryly, passing through the gate and approaching the edge of the moat. There was a temporary bridge between the moat and the village wall; Till, Khamsin, and I crossed it.

“Hrm? What are you going to do?”

I could hear Panamera’s voice from behind me, but opted to prioritize work for the moment. Surely she wouldn’t complain.

“Be careful and hold the side.”

At my order, Khamsin and Till nodded and took their positions. We’d attached a cover to the protective wall that could slide up and down—a sluice gate, if you will. It was in a spot that mostly went unnoticed. Till and I stood on the left, and Khamsin on the right. We were holding the handles on both sides.

It was then that a pair of adult apkallu popped their heads out of the water.

“Huh. Sending water off, eh?”

“Would you like our help?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Panamera and her entourage stirring on the other side of the moat.

“What? Are those apkallu? Why are they in a place like this?”

“Amazing. I’ve never seen one in person before...”

In response to Panamera and Arte, three apkallu children swam over.

“We live in the back!”

“Lord Van gives us delicious food!”

“I am Van’s wife. He is my husband.”

I didn’t need the kids saying unnecessary things at the moment. I hadn’t even noticed that Lada Priora was among them.

“You took an apkallu as your bride?!”

“It can’t be...”

And just like that, misunderstandings were born.

I shot Lada Priora a dead-eyed stare. “C’mon, you know we’re not married. I told your father that.”

Lada Priora glared back at me and dove under water, disappearing.

“Oooh, he bullied her!”

“He bullied Lada Priora!”

The children were pointing the finger at me, but I wouldn’t stand for it.

“If you’ve got complaints, no meat for you today.”

“Oh no!”

“Sorry!”

“I love you, Van! Meat, please!”

As soon as I drew my trump card, the kids changed their tune. Even Lada Priora had come back and requested meat. When I glanced her way, she hid again, but it was undoubtedly her voice I’d heard at the end there.

Kids are always so innocent and simpleminded, regardless of where they come from, thought eight-year-old me as I turned back to the adult apkallu.

“In that case, I’ll gladly take you up on your offer. Lifting it out of the water is hard work.”

The apkallu dipped their heads in assent and took over Till and Khamsin’s shift, so we crossed back over the bridge to the side where Panamera and the others were. Our guests gaped at me in shock.

“These apkallu serve you? That mystical, legendary species?”

“Those children were adorable...”

I smiled at their remarks and gave instructions to the apkallu, who easily lifted the sluice gate. Immediately, I could hear the sound of water getting sucked inside.

“All right, close it!”

“Understood.”

The apkallu did as instructed. Shortly after, the sounds ceased.

Panamera, looking restless, whirled to face us. “What was that just now? What happened?”

She’s champing at the bit here. If anything, she’s trying her darnedest to hold back.

“We switched out the sewer water. The toilets installed in each building have a hole running beneath them about five meters long. When water from the toilet tank is flushed, excrement is carried all the way down. The bottom is connected to the toilets via large pipes, so it starts smelling terrible and can bring about disease if it’s left untouched.”

“I-I see... That would be a problem,” she replied, a complicated expression on her face.

“Basically, I want to process the excrement. The plumbing is set at a downward angle, and we periodically run the moat water through. The slope allows the water to cleanse the piping.”

“This water...? Wait, where does that flow of water go then? Don’t tell me it’s returned to the moat!”

“No, no. Right now, we have the flow of water angled diagonally away from the front of the village toward an underground cavity. Also, we’re in the process of connecting plumbing to the bottom of that cavity. We’re ultimately going to have the water returned to the river. To tell you the truth, the plumbing hasn’t gotten as far as the river yet. It’ll probably be one or two days before that’s completed.”

The viscount’s face scrunched up. “Nrrrgh...”

Trying to describe something like this to someone so military-minded was always going to be tough. Heck, maybe the subject itself was never going to fly. Explaining the particulars would also be a pain. Afterward, I'd make it a point to explain using diagrams.

Now that we were finished with the water, it was time for the next job. Being the lord of a territory sure was a busy gig. I made my way to the in-progress perimeter wall. It was already gigantic, far wider than it had been before.

"Wow, you work fast. Looks like you've got at least thirty meters done."

Esparda nodded, a map in one hand. "The straight walls are all well and good, but things are going to get more complex from here. We have to create angles and draw out a proper hexagonal shape."

"Then we'll save the corners for later. First, I'll draw the perimeter on the ground. You focus on the front wall, okay?"

"Yes, my lord."

My directions had been kind of blasé, yet he responded with the utmost seriousness.

He's so cool. The picture-perfect butler!

As the one in charge of drawing out the lines, I had to make sure not to screw up. It'd be embarrassing if I did.

"I learned how to do triangulation, but I don't really remember it much... Well, the village will be at the center, so I can just have the corners run diagonal to it."

With that in mind, I inspected the angles.

Panamera called out to me from behind, flanked by her soldiers. "Are you looking at the angles? How do you plan on drawing out the lines?"

"We're going with a hexagon. Is something wrong with that?"

She brought a hand to her chin and scanned the area, nodding. "That's where the village wall will be, right? In that case, allow us to help. We can measure things with a rope, and we'll come up with a fairly accurate blueprint by connecting the lines. Come, let us measure out one side of the shape."

Panamera led her men in Esparda's direction, leaving only Arte and me behind. I hadn't expected her to be left without a guard detail.

"Are you okay by yourself?" I asked.

Her cheeks flushed pink as she dipped her head. I took it as a sign that she trusted me.

"Then how about we keep an eye on the measurements while strengthening the wall?"

I decided that I'd be dedicating my day to constructing the wall.

I climbed to the top of the newly created wall and set up a ballista.

"What is that, Lord Van?" Arte asked me.

"It's called a ballista. It's like a giant bow we use to protect the village."

Arte glanced at it. "It's so big and long. And it's also really, erm..."

"I know, it's pretty intimidating at first. But the bigger the better, right?"

"Lord Van... I'm getting a peculiarly indecent impression from—oh, um, forget I said anything!"

I couldn't help teasing Arte for her accidental innuendo. Ironically, Till was the one flushing bright red at this banter between children.

Well, she is eighteen. Of course her mind would go there, heh heh.

"Khamsin, could you show her how it works?"

"Of course!" he said happily. He moved to the controls, aiming for a tree in the distance.

The top of the new wall was wide, so this ballista was larger than the ones from before. It could fire two bolts, one after another. To be honest, I'd wanted to make something like a repeating crossbow, but I'd struggled to the point that I gave up on that one.

Being the boy that I was, I didn't want to fail in front of two beautiful girls. If anything, I wanted them to fawn over how amazing I was.

I kept my composure while thinking as much, and Khamsin opened fire. The ballista made a wild vibrating noise as the bolt zoomed through the air with incredible power. Its increased size was probably responsible for that. The bolt—which was about the size of a man’s arm—tore straight through the center of the large tree, then the one behind it, before finally snapping in half at the third.

Mm, it’s definitely a tier up from the old ones.

The bolt was as sharp as ever, but its destructive force was much higher, so large monsters wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Yeah, not bad at all. If we line these up, I’d say our defensive capabilities are pretty solid.”

When I turned around, Arte was blinking rapidly. “D-do bows have this kind of power...?”

“Not normally, but this is a ballista. It’s much stronger than an average bow.”

As I spoke to the bewildered Arte, Till and Khamsin turned toward me with blank expressions.

“Only *your* ballistae are this powerful, my lord...”

“This is absurd...”

I wasn’t in the mood to accept any protests, so I kept my mouth shut.

Panamera and her soldiers gawked at the ballista, then clambered up the wall, breath heaving. They’d apparently rushed over after hearing the trees fall, and one glance at the destruction had put them on high alert.

“Wh-what was that attack just now? Are we being stormed by giant monsters?!”

“Oh, no. We just tested one of the newly installed ballistae. Sorry, I should have told you beforehand,” I answered with a pained smile.

Panamera finally noticed the huge weapon. “This, eh? It *is* quite large. But does it really have the range to reach that forest? Are you certain we are not being attacked?”

She didn't seem to believe me.

"Khamsin, fire off another shot."

"Right! Watch closely, Lady Panamera!"

Khamsin giddily took up his position behind the ballista.

Looks like he admires her. Hmm, interesting...

It amused me to have discovered a new side to Khamsin. With even more enthusiasm than before, he aimed the ballista and fired off the second bolt. A loud *twang* filled the air, the vibrations reaching the pits of our stomachs. At the same time, the bolt pierced one tree, then two, and snapped at the third.

Mm-hmm. Excellent power.

When I looked at my audience, I found them stupefied. Even Khamsin was shocked, and he was the one who'd fired the ballista!

What the heck?

"W-wait just a minute. You have ballistae *this* powerful on the wall?"

I nodded lightly. "Approximately one hundred of them. And considering the situation with the village wall, I'll be preparing even more."

"One hundred?! And you made them all?! How much time and money does it take to build a single ballista? And what is it even made of, the same material as the houses?"

Panamera was so excited that she was shooting rapid-fire questions at me.

"Sorry, but those are all military secrets." I gave her a sly smile, causing her to take a step back, aghast.

"Hrk... Fair enough! But this technology is so... Fine! I won't ask for specifics. Let me buy this ballista at your asking price! I'll buy more than one!"

"I'm sorry, but they're not for sale. I'd be glad to hand some over if I were dealing with someone I knew for certain was my ally, but alas..."

I flashed an "angelic" smile, and Panamera clutched her head in anguish.

"Grr... You want definitive proof? How would I go about that? These ballistae

are just...”

After despairing over things for a bit, Panamera raised her head and stared me down.

“All right, fine. In that case, I, the viscount Panamera Carrera Cayenne, officially vow to form an alliance. I will write up a letter and have it sent to the capital today. Normally, alliances within the same nation are formed so that powerless nobles can receive protection, but I will stress that this is an alliance on equal footing.” She placed a hand over her heart. “Now royalty within the kingdom will recognize you as a sworn friend. Were I to betray this alliance, my life as a noble would be over.”

This was both a declaration and an oath. As this kingdom expanded its territory, more and more nobles became part of the same nation. Some of them were former enemies, so they used money, trade, and loyalty to ally with nobles who could protect them. This was essentially what Panamera was trying to do.

If I agreed to this, people would undoubtedly assume that—given our positions—I would be the powerless one under her protection. Given that Panamera was a rising member of the nobility with no territory of her own, her promise to defend us would make other nobles suspicious. That being said, this was an unbelievable chance for someone like me who lacked noble connections.

I nodded firmly and placed a hand over my chest. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Following our sudden formation of an alliance atop the still-in-progress village wall, the soldiers snapped into salutes. I didn’t know much about this sort of thing, so I glanced at Till and Khamsin, who also saluted. Even Arte was doing the same, despite not being one of my underlings.

Having judged that the alliance was established, Panamera beamed and moved her hand from her heart to the air.

“Then as our first show of cooperation, I can lend you a hundred soldiers for two weeks in exchange for one ballista. You can have them help you with work.” She flashed a teasing grin. “Just make sure to return them all when the time comes.”

The soldiers behind her saluted again. Given Panamera's personality, they were likely extremely well trained. And a hundred of them, to boot? They'd be more reliable than hiring a mercenary squad.

"Sounds good to me. So is that ballista fine, then? What about a carriage for transport or a bolt?"

Panamera walked over to the ballista and inspected it. "It looks quite heavy. It would probably be best to arrange for a carriage to carry it. As for the bolts... They're made of iron, yes? I could develop those on my own, I imagine."

Till and Khamsin exchanged looks.

"Lady Panamera, I would suggest taking one or two of Lord Van's bolts with you," Khamsin said.

"Why is that?" she asked, tilting her head.

"This right here is an extra-long sword that Lord Van made for me." Khamsin brandished one of the two swords at his hip.

Just the other day, I'd gifted him this iron sword during the festival. The blade itself was a meter long, and it had quite a bit of weight to it. Khamsin spent every night before bed swinging it around with tears of joy. I'd made the blade a little thicker than usual so he'd be able to use it for a long time, but it was still sharp as all get-out.

Panamera admired the weapon. "What a fascinating sword. I've never seen one shaped like it. That said, I'm not so sure I could count on it to fare well against an opponent in full armor or with a shield." She seemed doubtful, but Khamsin bobbed his head encouragingly.

"Do you have any swords you don't mind damaging?" he asked.

"Hrm, well, swords are disposable tools. It doesn't really bother me when one breaks," she replied, drawing her own blade. It was thick, like a nata. Or perhaps a machete. "This is my spare. I've used it in many battles. It's a bit short, but it's easy to handle."

"I see. If you'll excuse me, then..."

"Of course. I'd be amazed if you could chip it," Panamera said with a tight

smile as Khamsin took his stance.

He swung his blade down at Panamera's, an apologetic look on his face. The sword whooshed through the air, and then came the sound of metal scraping metal.

"I thought you made contact, but did you only brush it? I barely felt an impact." Panamera tilted her head at the odd sensation.

A moment later, half of the blade fell right off. When it clattered to the ground, everyone's eyes nearly popped out of their skulls. Khamsin proudly sheathed his sword, and Till pumped her fist in excitement.

After a time, Panamera raised her cleaved sword into the air. "You broke it? No, you cut it in half?! This was high-purity steel! There's no way that sword is iron!"

I shook my head. "No, it *is* in fact iron. It's just made a bit differently."

The viscount went silent and looked down at her weapon. Then, as if suddenly remembering what this whole thing was originally about, she looked back up at me. "Hold on. Are the ballista bolts anything like this...?"

"Yep. Just like that sword, they're slightly sharper than normal iron bolts. They can pierce through the bodies of two or three armored lizards, actually."

"Say what?!" Panamera shouted, failing to hide her shock. "Name your price, and I'll buy it. Please sell me bolts as well. As long as I have the means, I *will* be taking them home."

"Thank you for your business!"

I grinned, pleased by the beginning of our beautiful partnership.

That night marked the second time the village enjoyed some festivities. As their lord, I had only intended this to be a fun barbecue—not a flashy, formal celebration like the last one—but sadly the scale wound up being the same. The villagers cut loose, taking the event as yet another festival.

"I see! So Lady Arte is the count's daughter? Man, please take good care of Lord Van! He is a wonderful person!"

“Ever since he became our lord, the village has changed completely!”

“I’m just so happy that Lord Van is marrying someone as beautiful as you, Lady Arte! Talk about marrying into money!”

“You idiot, Lord Van is the son of a marquis!”

“Which one is ranked the highest?”

“Are you stupid?! The king!”

Poor Arte was surrounded by drunk villagers, completely at a loss. Panamera watched her from afar with a smile, a drink, and some meat.

Isn't she going to help her?

“Come now, everyone! Don’t surround our precious guest like that!”

I clapped my hands as I strode toward Arte, who dashed to meet me with tears in her eyes.

“The king has arrived!”

“That’s our Lord Van! Lady Arte’s going to fall head over heels for him, y’know.”

“For sure. Might as well be their wedding night!”

Drunk middle-aged dudes being kinda gross is the same no matter where you go.

Arte’s face went bright red as the men got excited over their vulgar conversation.

“Okay, c’mon, guys. If you’re going to drink, be quiet about it. And no refills,” I said.

“Awww!”

“That’s unreasonable...”

They griped and groaned behind me, but I ignored them. Till spun around and shot them an icy glare, and they froze and went quiet.

Good enough.

“Would you care to eat with me?” I asked, and Arte nodded. “Now then,

we've got a good handle on the measurements, so we should wrap up this wall in about a month."

"Indeed," Khamsin said. "Given the scale we're working with, a month sounds about right."

"Hopefully nothing happens before we finish," Till murmured.

Arte looked puzzled by our conversation. "You mean the one wall facing the road will be complete?"

"No, all of it."

"A-all of it...?"

Her shock was understandable. Normally, a wall like that would take much longer to build. If I remembered correctly, the one in the capital took three years. Wall expansions were years-long projects as well. This sort of work took a lot of time and manpower.

Back in the day, territorial feuds were especially fierce, with new nations being born and old ones getting absorbed. The world map changed at a dizzying speed. As such, the prized four elemental magics were primarily used to protect contested territories. Castle and village construction was left to prisoners of war, slaves, or commoners.

First-rate elemental mages were almost certainly unaccustomed to working on walls every day like I did. Granted, if a wall was built solely with earth magic, it would eventually crumble into a pile of dirt. The process didn't work without a production mage in the mix.

"Anyway, we're disregarding the usual processes and time periods necessary for this kind of thing. I'd like to have the internal wall ready by the time Rango the merchant comes back to the village."

"A merchant? B-but why? Is he dangerous?"

Arte looked concerned, so I smiled brightly at her. "If possible, I'd really like to surprise him."

Final Chapter: Battle of the Nameless Village

PANAMERA'S MEN WERE SKILLED AND DILIGENT. They split up the work, making sure the measurements were accurate and helping the villagers transport materials. In fact, they were such good builders that Esparda's magical foundation work wasn't going to catch up.

When he built a portion of the wall, they brought over timberwork and stone to strengthen and fix it into place. I would put on the finishing touches, then make ballistae at the top of the wall. I was far busier than I'd ever been before, but it was fun seeing our village take shape.

After the barbecue party, I considered laying out stones for the ground of the village, but Esparda and Dee caught me.

Shouldn't they be exhausted by now?

"You weren't able to fit your studies in yesterday."

"Same with your sword training!"

"Just to be clear, I can't do both at once."

I gave up and let them drag me away.

Two weeks sped by, and we managed to complete the inner hexagon and two of the road-facing triangles. All we needed to do was make four more triangle-shaped village walls, and we'd complete the hexagram. The apkallu's lake didn't fit at the moment, so we'd have to build the wall farther out to enclose it.

Also, we currently had fifty two-shot ballistae installed. Once everything was completed, we'd have at least three hundred ready to go. That would take us another week, since we currently didn't have the necessary materials.

"I know I shouldn't be saying this, considering I've been assisting you, but I can no longer count how many times I've been surprised," Panamera muttered.

She folded her arms and sighed. The movement made her own “village wall” protecting her cleavage stand out more than usual, but I wasn’t foolish enough to remark upon that.

“Ah, yes. The main body of the wall is complete, knockers—er, I mean, knock on wood. If our population increases or merchants and adventurers move here, I’ll just build some new homes.”

“I am truly jealous. It is my dream to have my own territory, you see, but it takes far too much time and money. I can’t possibly ask the count to accommodate me when he only just had territory taken from him. I’ll have to accomplish so much in the next big battle that money won’t be enough of a prize. When the time comes, I would welcome any kind of help you could give me,” she said lightly, beaming at me with a shake of her shoulders.

Just then, Ortho’s shout tore through the air.

“Heeelp!”

It was uncommon for him to cry out so fearfully. Actually, I’d *never* seen him this distressed—especially not since I sold him that weapon. He’d been hunting down huge creatures for a while now. Yet there he was, sprinting toward us along with his party. They looked nothing like the pros I knew.

“There’s a dragon behind us!” he hollered, pointing behind him.

“A dragon?”

Does he mean more armored lizards?

I squinted into the distance, trying to get a better look. Trees were ripped out at the roots as a great beast tore through the forest. The dragon appeared before us, flapping its massive wings.

“A dragon!”

“Impossible! This place may be rural, but there’s a road right there!”

The villagers and soldiers cried out in surprise.

What does being rural have to do with anything? Is this like how you might see wild boars on the road in the Japanese countryside? No, dragons and wild boars are worlds apart! Little Van needs to calm down.

From snout to tail, the dragon was about fifteen meters long. The last time I'd seen a creature that large was Jinbei, the whale shark at the aquarium. But this dragon was far beefier, its wingspan just as big as its length.

Judging by its green scales, it was a forest dragon. Forest dragons typically made their homes deep within the woods, lording over their domain. They hunted prey with their deadly fangs, claws, and tail. Since they weren't a very high-level type of dragon, they had no breath weapon.

Regardless, we were being attacked by a flying monster, which meant swords and spears were useless here. We'd have to fight with ballistae and magic.

I switched gears and sucked in a breath, calmly thinking how best to tackle this. "Everyone, evacuate to the inner wall! Once Ortho and his people pass through, shut the gates! Anyone with open hands, move to the top of the wall!"

Despite being faced with the worst-case scenario, the villagers moved quickly and precisely.

"Do as he says! I will head to the top of the wall!"

Panamera told her soldiers to follow my orders, and they swiftly set off.

"Lord Van!" Arte called out to me, her face pale with fright.

I racked my brain for a way to make her feel safe, but with a dragon on our doorstep, I wouldn't be able to assuage her fears so easily. I needed to explain things clearly and concisely.

"That beast is a forest dragon. They live deep in the woods. They can fly, but they shouldn't be able to use their breath against us because they're only mid-tier dragons. Remember, we have my ballistae and Esparda, an elemental mage. And Lady Panamera also, I'm sure."

I glanced at the top of the village wall, where Panamera stood at the edge, chanting.

"We might not be able to defeat it, but we won't lose," I said with a smile.

Arte clasped both hands in front of her, as though in prayer, then nodded. "I-I know! May victory shine upon you...and please don't die!"

"Ha ha ha. They won't let me up on the wall, so no worries. Till, can you take

Lady Arte to the manor?”

“Uh, got it! I’ll be back in a moment. Come now, Lady Arte. Right this way,” my maid told the young girl as they hurried back to the manor.

Just as everyone had moved behind the walls, Ortho’s party arrived.

“D-don’t shut us out, okay?! We’re coming!”

They were panicked and extremely winded. The dragon was so close that I wasn’t sure we’d be able to close the doors in time even if Ortho’s party made it to them.

“Ballistae, ready! Do not hit the adventurers! To start, let’s knock that dragon to the ground! Aim for its wings!”

Everyone on the ballistae adjusted their aim at once.

At that moment, one of the smaller members of Ortho’s party tripped and fell over. It was Pluriel.

“Ngh! Go on without me!”

The party had stopped, but she told them to keep going. Ortho hesitated for a brief moment, then took a fighting stance with his sword.

“Get up, Pluriel! Come on! This way, you scaly bastard!” Ortho cried out, smacking his sword and shield together and moving away from the road.

The gargantuan forest dragon turned its gaze on Ortho, but it continued to move in Pluriel’s direction.

“Tch, guess I have no choice!”

Kusala tossed his knife at the beast despite his reservations. It flew through the air like an arrow, zipping toward the dragon’s head—but one flap of its monstrous wings was enough to change its trajectory.

The knife bounced off the dragon’s wing without leaving a mark, yet it was enough for the dragon to pivot toward Kusala. The massive creature opened its mouth and let out a guttural roar, eyes glowing with rage.

“Ah, damn it all! I’m done for! Guys, go on without me! Go!”

“All right, to the village wall!”

“Really, Boss?! Aren’t you treating me a little differently?!” Kusala complained as he ran around the road, the dragon closing in on him.

Ortho nodded his head firmly. “You’re the fastest one in the party! I know you’ll make it back alive, so hurry and get your ass over here once Pluriel gets to the wall!”

“You better not be screwing around, Boss! It sure sounds like you’re abandoning me!”

“Don’t let Kusala’s sacrifice be in vain, guys!”

“Oh, I am gonna *destroy* you if I make it out of this!”

The pair sounded like they were joking with each other, but their faces were dead serious. I mean, they *were* being attacked by a dragon.

“Ballistae! Once you take aim, fire! Kusala’s about to be devoured like a scrumptious meal! Take that thing out before it can even taste him!”

“Ain’t that a bit rude, little lord?!”

Kusala was waving both fists in the air in anger. He had a lot more energy than I’d expected.

Activating her magic, Panamera cut in, “I’m best suited to stop it in its tracks. I’ll keep it in check with one move!”

I had assumed as much. After all, the count had found her useful at such a young age and even promoted her due to her successes in battle. She was undoubtedly a first-rate elemental mage, and in a moment, I would find out what aptitude she had.

“Fire Javelin!”

With that single utterance, a giant ball of flames appeared from Panamera’s extended hand, taking the form of a spear that launched into the air. The flaming projectile was larger than her body, and it hurtled toward the dragon.

To dodge the incoming attack, the forest dragon folded its wings and dropped to the ground. It then kicked off the earth with all four limbs, springing to the side. Once the javelin had safely passed, the dragon then broke into a run on all fours. It looked just like a Komodo dragon, but its body was so huge that it was

absolutely terrifying. Even as it slowed down a little, it was about as fast as my top running speed.

Fortunately, a volley of bolts went flying from the wall; the ballistae must have finished loading. The creature surely had excellent vision, as it proceeded to try and evade the wave of bolts—but it couldn't escape dozens of them all at once. Bolts pierced the beast's body, wings, and feet. I counted maybe five in total. I wouldn't have known what to do if the bolts had merely bounced off its scales, but thankfully, they pierced through with no problem.

But I felt like the ballistae took a lot longer to fire since they'd been upsized. They used the principle of leverage to pull the drawstring, so I'd made the rod longer and increased the number of gears. Apparently, it needed more strength to set up than before.

As I thought about modifications, I watched the dragon through the half-open doors. It lost its balance and crashed to the ground with a cry of pain, stopping near the road.

"Hurry with the second volley! Once you're ready, fire at will!"

As soon as I issued the command, a second volley of bolts went flying. Just as much time passed in between. We had fifty ballistae set up in total, but the front-facing wall had only fifteen. At best, we could shoot fifteen bolts.

The dragon made a huge leap to the side, blood gushing freely from its wounds. This time, it dodged all of the projectiles. The bolts plunged into the road, and the dragon took no damage. On the bright side, the first volley had done a real number on it. With a groan, the dragon dropped low to the ground.

"W-we're saved!"

"I-I can't believe we got back in one piece..."

Ortho's party had made it safely to the wall. They were relieved, but we had yet to drive back the dragon. Finally, Kusala arrived at the wall, looking half dead and panting heavily.

"I-I ain't never gonna forget how you treated me..."

Behind him, the dragon kicked off the ground again. It was then that a second

fiery projectile appeared.

“Fire Javelin!”

As before, a giant ball of fire materialized in Panamera’s hands and took the form of a spear.

“I’ll stop it in its tracks with this next javelin! Everyone, retreat to the village! We’re lacking in numbers!”

Having spoken her command, she fired the spear. The dragon prepared to dodge, but her weapon changed trajectory just before it hit the target, chasing it like a heat-seeking missile.

It exploded in a near-direct hit.

The fierce column of flames burned the dragon’s face and part of its body, causing it to roar in pain and bend backward, retreating two steps.

So that’s the true strength behind fire magic, eh?

If we weren’t fighting a dragon, it would have had even more tremendous destructive power and versatility. This kind of flashy attack usually brought with it good results on the battlefield. *I’d* been so surprised by the dragon’s appearance that I was slow to act in comparison. I definitely lacked real combat experience.

“All right! Everyone, retreat to the village!”

I repeated Panamera’s orders—again, I was one step behind. We all dashed back to the village with the soldiers leading the way, and the villagers who had come to help build the wall were running as fast as they could.

“Leave the rear to me, Lord Van!”

Dee left his men around us as he stayed at the back.

“You can’t! I said we’re fleeing to the village!” I shouted angrily. “People in front, get the villagers who stayed behind to ready the ballistae!”

It was then that I ran past Esparda, who stopped in his tracks.

“Esparda?!”

I spun around to see him face the incoming dragon and prepare a magic spell.

When the dragon arrived at the village wall, it kicked the ground and leapt up, perching atop the structure while digging its front claws into the inner wall. My breath caught at the way it sat there, glaring as it waited for our next move.

I'd let myself get a big head after our victory over the armored lizards. They were small fry compared to this monster. Even though its wings were damaged, forcing it to run on land, it hadn't become any less threatening.

"Esparda, we're running!" I shouted, but he didn't budge. "All right—if you're staying, then I'm staying!"

The butler looked my way, lips quirked up ever so slightly. "Well, that would be a problem. Allow me to buy some time just once. You may go ahead, my lord."

I held my ground despite the urgency. "I told you, I'm not going back without you!"

Esparda forced a smile and activated his magic.

The dragon launched itself from the wall only to smack straight into a giant earthen barrier, bashing its head against the structure. The ground shook, and Esparda's wall collapsed on the dragon, stopping it in its tracks.

Esparda stroked his chin. "Hrm, I think I've bought us a bit of time." He then turned on his heel and started walking toward me...slowly. Too slowly.

"Let's go! Pick up the pace! If you run, I'll buy you your favorite red wine!"

"You know how much it aches for these old bones to sprint, but fine, I will do my best."

My pep talk was enough to get Esparda jogging.

Khamsin whirled to face me. "I'll run with Esparda, so you go on ahead!"

I swapped places with him and broke into a sprint. I was close to the village gate, yet it felt abnormally far away. Ortho's party had run the entire way here, so they were slowing down too.

"We're in position, boy!" Panamera said from atop the protective wall. Villagers were posted at all the ballistae.

“Load the bolts and prepare to fire!” I replied as I ran. “If we don’t lure it in first, we won’t hit it! Just be ready!”

The villagers prepared themselves. They had ballista operation down pat, so it took them no time at all.

“What should I do?” Panamera cried out. “Do I have your permission to move independently?”

I’m surprised she even asked.

“Use your magic to stop it in its tracks one last time! Then the ballistae will take care of the rest!”

The viscount grinned. “Excellent. This is the first time my magic has been used to stall for time!”

“I’m terribly sorry about that! I’ll give you some dragon meat, so please forgive me!”

“Gah ha ha ha! Fine with me! Now then, our meat is on the move!”

I checked behind me to see that the dragon was indeed pulling itself out from the rubble.

“It’s coming!” I shouted, setting my sights back on the village gate.

As we got closer and closer to the protective wall, the ground trembled underfoot and a roar sounded behind us. The dragon was creating these fierce tremors with each stomp of its feet.

Esparda and Khamsin were a little ways behind me. I thought about asking the butler to use his magic, but he wouldn’t be able to cast it in time. If anything, we would be better off baiting the dragon as close as we could for the ballistae to fire upon it.

The problem was this awkward distance. If the dragon dodged the first volley—as it had earlier—it would take time to reload. We could stop it in its tracks, but then everything would depend on Panamera’s magic.

In that case, is it better to stick to the plan and have Panamera use her magic to stall the dragon, then blast it away with the ballistae? No, the range is off for that too. The farther away it is, the more of a delay there’ll be.

“If we can just buy enough time for Esparda and the others to get away, then —”

Something zoomed by me with incredible speed.

“Leave it to me!”

The blur turned out to be Dee, who was brandishing the large sword I’d made for him. Even though he was in full armor and carrying his sword with both hands, he was running faster than I could.

“I shall handle this!”

“Deputy Commander, you’re too fast!”

Arb and Lowe followed after him, equipped with large shields and long swords.

“Are you three going to be okay?!” I blurted out, but he’d already passed Esparda.

Dee swung his sword down from above. “Hiyaaah!”

At the same time, the dragon sought to deliver death with a swipe of its foreleg. Blade and claw clashed in perfect tandem. A low but tremendous boom sounded, and Dee’s sword sliced into the ground.

Two of the dragon’s claws were cleaved in half, and the chunks fell to the ground. The dragon unleashed an earsplitting scream, shook its head in rage, and spun its large body around.

“T-take this!”

“C’mooooon!”

Arb and Lowe rushed around the defenseless Dee, shields thrust out—but one snap of the dragon’s tail sent them flying. Since Dee was next to them, he was hit as well. The three men rolled along the ground, and Esparda began casting a spell. A dirt wall rose up to protect the knights, but the dragon destroyed it with one foreleg.

“Everybody, run!” I yelled.

Esparda and Khamsin were the first to come running my way.

That's fine and all, but the knights are the ones in trouble here!

Much to my surprise, they had already regrouped. It was downright superhuman.

"Retreat!"

"Yes, sir!"

At Dee's command, the three men started running back toward the village. Funnily enough, the oldest man present was the fastest of the bunch. Arb and Lowe were close behind him, but the dragon was hot on their heels. In fact, it was poised to go after Arb.

"Eeek!" Arb squealed, half in tears.

With one sidelong glance at him, I decided that the dragon was close enough.

"Panamera!"

"Got it!"

When I called her name, she popped off a swift reply and raised one hand.

"Fire Javelin!"

The magic activated, sending a flaming spear toward the dragon's face. The beast slowed down and wrapped its wings around itself, strengthening its defenses. The spear collided with it, exploding in a pillar of flames.

I had a bad feeling about this. "Ngh! Ballistae! Half the force on the western side, fire!"

Right afterward, the dragon spread its wings wide, dispersing the flames. Then the bolts rained down from above. The creature evaded most of them and only a handful made contact, striking its shoulder, hind leg, and the tip of its tail. They did a good deal of damage, though. The dragon tilted and collapsed to the ground.

I issued the next command: "All ballistae, fire your remaining bolts!"

The next instant, the last set of bolts flew toward the dragon. It tried to dodge even in its prone state, moving its head out of the way. Several of my Van-made bolts pierced the beast's body, wing joints, and legs.

A fatal blow.

With a great death rattle, the dragon collapsed for good.

“Ballistae, reload and stay ready!”

Just to be safe, I had the ballistae keep their guard up. Panamera also began to chant her magic.

“Dee, can you check the body?”

Given that he was fairly close to the beast, I asked Dee to confirm the kill. He raised his sword in response. We all watched with bated breath as he carefully approached the large body. As soon as he was within reach, he took a stance and stabbed the dragon’s bloody arm.

Immediately, the fallen beast whipped its head toward Dee to try and swallow him whole.

“Ngh!”

Without hesitation, Dee dodged the dragon and brought his large sword down on its neck. He decapitated it in one stroke, and its head rolled across the ground.

After it fell, Lowe shouted, “W-we won!”

Yeah, we’re okay now.

Once I saw it with my own eyes, I turned to the villagers on the wall and yelled as loudly as I could.

“Victory is ours! Let our voices cry out in triumph!”

The village filled with joyful cheers of victory.

“Are you okay, my lord?!”

“Are you hurt?!”

When we returned to the village, both Till and Arte came running up to me.

“Don’t worry, I’m okay. If anything, you should ask poor Esparda because he was running this whole time. Oh, and the knights took a real hit.”

“Got it! But you’re first, Lord Van. Come, this way.”

Till dragged me into a nearby house and sat me down on a chair. Quite frankly, I was exhausted, so it was nice.

“Excellent leadership, boy,” Panamera said, sauntering over. “And congratulations on slaying the dragon. A beast like that could annihilate a midsize town. Word that you’ve defeated one will soon spread.”

The soldiers looked pleased as they chatted with their comrades on their way into the village. The villagers themselves were laughing together with a casual air.

Honestly, I think everybody was more excited during the armored lizard attack.

“We slew a dragon, huh? It was too close for comfort. If you, Esparda, or Dee hadn’t been there... Heck, if your men hadn’t been there...”

I hinted that we were lucky, but Panamera broke into a grin. “If that forest dragon had attacked the big city in Ferdinatto County, half the place would’ve been destroyed. Part of the wall would have collapsed, and there would’ve been hundreds of casualties.”

“Really?” I said, “I always figured the count would have proper defenses in place.”

“Hah. There aren’t many like your butler, Esparda. And certainly not like Dee, who was able to cut the dragon’s head off in one slice. Not to mention those absurdly powerful ballistae! I never thought they’d pierce a dragon’s scales,” she said, somewhat exasperated.

I smiled and nodded. “I’m very proud of all of them. Arb, Lowe, and Khamsin plan on becoming as strong as Dee, you know. Also, I have to modify the ballistae. I’d like them to be able to fire ten bolts in a row.”

“I feel like you’ve just said something terrifying, but all right. Anyway, our first priority is to celebrate the dragon’s defeat. First, Dee should be granted the title of Dragonslayer. Second, we must commend your leadership on the battlefield. And something for Esparda as well.”

Wait, Dee's getting upgraded to "Dragonslayer" now?!

Epilogue: Van's Commendation

I MADE MY WAY TO THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE MANOR with Till in tow, stepped out onto the balcony, and unfurled my speech. Crowded outside the manor were Esparda, Dee and his knights, the villagers, the adventurers, Bell, Arte, and Panamera's soldiers. There were only about two hundred people, but seeing them all in one place made them seem more plentiful.

Acutely feeling everyone's eyes on me, I began reading from the paper. "Um... The forest dragon, lord of the woodland, has been slain! We will now commend those who contributed the most to this victory! This ceremony will be led by the head of House Cayenne, Lady Panamera Carrera Cayenne!"

This was an entirely informal ceremony, but Panamera nonetheless appeared on the balcony alongside me. She was as dashing as ever. The atmosphere changed, and the villagers looked nervous.

Have I not distinguished myself enough to earn that kind of reaction? I wondered.

Panamera took a moment to scan the audience before speaking. "The forest dragon you've all joined hands to defeat would normally have been slain by the Chivalric Order and court mages. A town or small village such as yours would have ordinarily been wiped out. Even a fortified city would have suffered great losses."

The villagers stirred.

"However, this small village survived. Not only that, but there were no casualties, and the only damaged items were the in-progress wall and two ballistae. This is an unbelievable achievement."

Astonished gasps and whispers sounded in the audience.

I get it, guys, but please keep it down.

Panamera's face relaxed a little at their reaction. "I will now name those who

contributed most to this remarkable deed. First is Dee, deputy commander of Lord Fertio's Chivalric Order. He took off the head of a fifteen-meter forest dragon in one slash, bringing a decisive end to this conflict. As such, the first commendation goes to Deputy Commander Dee. We honor him for his distinguished service!"

The crowd whooped and hollered, and Panamera waited for the applause to die down.

"Next is Esparda, an exceptional elemental mage. Not once but *twice* did he stop the dragon in its tracks with his magic, which I must say is beyond compare. As such, we honor him for his distinguished service."

Another commotion as the villagers expressed their awe and astonishment. It made sense, considering how hard it was to get them to understand what made a mage so amazing.

Then Panamera glanced at me. "And finally, Van Nei Fertio, fourth son of Lord Fertio. Possessing remarkable knowledge, drive, and tact for an eight-year-old, he made use of unknown magic to strengthen the defenses of this village in a short period of time. His accomplishments proved crucial during this forest dragon attack, and he also served as commander of the battle. Therefore, we honor Van Nei Fertio for his distinguished service!"

The villagers erupted into cheers.



The sounds of people calling out my name left me a bit rattled, so I waved at the crowd. The resulting cacophony would've made a first-rate idol blush.

I am Van the idol. Charging one silver for a handshake!

Just like that, the ceremony came to an end.

Afterward, it was time to harvest materials from the dragon. We had Panamera's elite soldiers, so the work went by quickly.

Panamera sliced one of the dragon's fangs, dumbfounded at the clean cutting ability of a Van-made blade. "What?! What is this sword?! Don't tell me you made it!"

"Yep, and the blade is sharpened for collecting materials. It's perfectly usable in combat, though."

"You gave them out to all the soldiers, didn't you?! That's over a hundred of them! Aren't they special?!"

"I can make one for five gold."

Panamera merely gaped at me in disbelief.

Side Story: Till's Hard Work

TILL'S MORNINGS STARTED EARLY.

Her charge, Van Nei Fertio, was the fourth son of the marquis, Jalpa Bul Ati Fertio. As one of his caretakers and a maid-in-training, Till had to wake up earlier than anyone else.

On this particular day, she peeled off her shabby nightdress—essentially a strip of cloth with holes for her head and shoulders—and put on her maid uniform. Having once been in slavery, Till was overjoyed at just being able to wear something so lovely.

“Okay, I think I have it on right. No wrinkles... Aw, there’s a stain on the skirt...”

It was a tiny stain, but the moment she spotted it, Till’s face hardened as if it were the end of the world. A few moments later, she noticed the sunlight spilling through the window. Her eyes flew wide, and she clasped her hands in front of her chest.

“Oh, gosh! Work!”

Realizing she was about to be late, she scurried out of the room. In fact, she was in such a rush that she left the door wide open.

A deep sigh echoed through the room she left behind.

“Thanks to her, now *I’m* getting up early,” said the sixteen-year-old girl sitting up in the bed opposite Till’s.

Though she was older, this maid was still a teenager. She changed into her uniform, grumbling all the while.

“Seriously, thank goodness Lord Van is our charge. If we had to serve Lord Jard or Lord Sesto, Till would earn me more than a few beatings.” She shrugged, sighing. “Who knows how things will look from here on out, though.”

Jard was ten now, and Sesto was eight. Both children were already little tyrants. Ever since finding out at eight that they had an aptitude for fire magic, they had become extremely arrogant. When things didn't go their way, they threw a fit. Plenty of maids and butlers had provoked their wrath, resulting in both physical and psychological abuse. Some were dismissed on the spot.

Lord Van, on the other hand, only exhibited the usual selfishness of a child his age. He was vocal about what he liked and disliked, wanted things that interested him, and so on. Perhaps that was why the maids chosen to be his caretakers were often young and inexperienced.

Finished changing, the girl stretched confidently.

“Mmm! Time to give it my all.”

It was Till's duty to set up Van's room before the older maids gathered for work. Needless to say, everything had been cleaned up the day before, but that also meant his necessities were back on their respective shelves. Those had to be readied as well.

First up were his favorite chair—a low stool—and a round table. Till placed a wooden bowl and cup on the table. Next, she prepared the bulky towel and sheet Van used for his naps. He had a lavish, child-sized bed, but it being waist height had frightened the young boy. As such, they wrapped the sheet over the thick towel for him to nap on.

Last but not least were Van's current favorite toys: a wooden horse and sword. Till laid these on either side of the table so he could play with them after eating. Once those were in place, her prep work was complete.

“Hee hee, what a cute table and chair.” Till smiled kindly as she set the table down in the center of the room. She adjusted the angle of the chair so Van could look out the window while he ate.

Since this wasn't exactly backbreaking work, she spent plenty of time on it. After she confirmed that everything was neat and tidy, four older maids entered the room.

“Good morning, Till.”

“Good morning!”

They exchanged greetings, and the older maids checked over Till’s work.

“Oh, Till—it would be best if the sword went on the right and the horse on the left. Lord Van is right-handed.”

“Oops, sorry.”

Till hurriedly bowed her head. Before becoming one of Van’s caretakers, she had been physically punished for any mistakes. The trauma from that still affected her, and she would react severely to even a light warning. But because she made mistakes so frequently, the people around her knew she was a clumsy person.

“It’s fine, really. You know he would never get angry over something like this, right?”

The maids exchanged nods.

“Everything else looks good. Let us go and fetch Lord Van.”

“Right.”

“I wonder what’s for breakfast today?”

“Pumpkin soup, bread, thinly sliced pork, and fruit.”

“Lord Van loves chicken, doesn’t he?”

“He loves all kinds of meat, so it will be fine.”

“I wonder if I can have some fruit...”

“You really are a glutton, aren’t you?”

The maids engaged in pleasant banter on their way out of the room. Of all the maids working in the Fertio household, these five were undoubtedly living the most peaceful lives. Knowing this, they treated the young Van as kindly as possible to avoid drawing his ire.

Incidentally, this was one of the reasons Jard and Sesto had transformed into such tyrants, but none of them had realized it.

Van's mornings started early. As the sun shone brilliantly through his window, he showed no signs of stirring.

Eventually, a group of girls appeared, gently calling his name. Their tender, singsong voices roused him from slumber. The boy opened his eyes and sat up, and the girls gently lifted him to his feet. They informed him that it was morning and began to change his clothes.

"Oh my. Did you have night sweats, my lord?"

"Would you like to take a hot bath?"

Van groggily turned down the offer for a morning bath. "Mmn, I hate mornings..."

The little boy mumbled incomprehensibly as he sat on his tiny stool and ate his bread. His maids were all smiles. They assumed these days would continue for some time.

That is, until one day when Till woke Van to find that something was off. It was as if his mind had suddenly cleared, and he was now talking about all kinds of things. The maids were bewildered as Van expressed his thoughts on a variety of complex topics.

But his kind and innocent personality remained unchanged.

"Lord Van seems interested in all sorts of things."

"More than eating and playing?"

"Just the other day, he asked Till about the kingdom. Would a two-year-old really be interested in that kind of thing?"

This sort of back-and-forth transpired over and over again, and the maids eventually reached the consensus that Van was a child prodigy. He was already walking and talking with ease, initiating conversations on his own. Having become aware of his surroundings, Van must have begun to question things in a way no normal child would.

Reaching this conclusion, the maids decided to educate Van on every topic he showed interest in. The only problem was that his questions ranged from simple to complicated, and they were about things that even the maids had

never considered before.

“Lord Van asked me how our kingdom was founded.”

“He asked me why magical aptitudes exist.”

“He asked *me* what sorts of other countries are out there. Where did he even get that idea from?”

The maids were confident in their knowledge of household chores and etiquette, but not so when it came to culture and history. In a royal or ducal household, there would be multiple maids from noble backgrounds who had received a proper education growing up. Those maids would’ve been able to answer such difficult questions.

But maids from a knight’s household or nearby towns—or even former slaves—would never be able to provide adequate responses. They were also young, so they would have had few opportunities to learn about such things.

As the maids’ answers became more and more ambiguous, Till alone continued to explain things to Van with strangely boundless confidence. She believed more strongly than anyone else that Van was a genius, and whenever he asked a question she could not answer, she secretly went to the study to learn about the topic. Being a maid from a count’s household originally, Till had been educated enough to read, write, and perform simple math.

“Um, let me see... Books about monsters...”

One day, while searching the study, she heard a low male voice from behind her.

“Do you have business in the study?”

Till leapt up in surprise.

“Eeek! Esparda?!”

She whirled around to see Esparda, narrowing his eyes at her. She’d been caught red-handed.

“Do not tell me you plan on selling books.”

“O-of course not!” Till responded tearfully. Terrified, she shook her head.

Esparda shot her a sidelong glance, then gazed at the carefully organized row of books. “Was there a book you were looking for?”

Till gave a little nod. “Um... Lord Van said he wanted to learn about monsters, so...”

“Is that so?” Esparda asked, stroking his chin.

“Y-yes. I told him they were terrifying creatures that feast on humans, but then he asked me what types there were and how to defeat them.”

Esparda read between the lines: Till could no longer provide the boy with those answers, so she sought books that could give her the knowledge she needed.

“Hrm, and Lord Van initiated this topic?” Visibly intrigued, the old butler studied Till’s face. “What other questions did he have?”

“Er, well, he asked about the founding of the kingdom, our relationship with neighboring nations, how powerful the Chivalric Order is, about magic... Oh, and he also asked about the role of the nobility and money.”

Esparda’s eyes crinkled in the corners. “Lord Van is but two years old, is he not? Yet he has such questions about the world *and* he understands the answers... Heh, fascinating.” He casually plucked a book off the shelf and handed it to Till. “If you seek fundamental knowledge on monsters, this book should serve that purpose. I grant you permission to borrow it, so please read it to Lord Van.”

With that, the butler left the study. Finally released from the tense situation, Till clutched the book to her chest and let out a deep sigh.

Afterward, Esparda would go on to ask Van’s maids all kinds of questions before directly asking Lord Jalpa for permission to serve as his tutor. Till still had no idea that it was her report that resulted in a two-year-old Van having to study his butt off.

When Van turned four, Lord Jalpa heard all about his immense growth from Esparda, and so the boy was allowed to participate in sword training a year earlier than other children.

The maids had been ordered to serve as his opponents until he was used to swinging a sword, so Van spent his days happily training with the girls. He got to mock-battle with adorable maids—what was not to like?

As the days went by, the maids could no longer keep up with Van's reflexes and movement; he didn't move the way a child his age should have.

"It seems like Lord Van can tell where I'm going to go."

"Yeah, exactly. I can't win at all."

As the maids conversed, Till rubbed her chin, a serious expression on her face. "Perhaps Lord Van is also a natural-born swordsman?"

Everyone laughed—until they didn't.

"...It's a little early, but should we report this to someone?"

No one explicitly said what they'd be reporting, but most of the maids nodded in silence.

Till, however, tilted her head. "You mean to Esparda?"

Shock rippled through the others.

"Esparda, really?"

"Isn't he scary?"

"He's much kinder than you think," Till told them.

"I don't buy it."

"He always has such a scary look on his face."

"Then will *you* go tell him, Till?"

The maids seemed doubtful, but to their surprise, Till gladly agreed to be the messenger.

"I was joking, Till," said the maid who'd asked, a concerned look on her face. "You don't have to force yourself."

"Honestly, don't push yourself so hard..."

The girls were worried, yet Till smiled innocently and bobbed her head. "Don't worry! I'll be right back!"

She ran off to find Esparda and informed him of Van's amazing sword skills. For a moment, Esparda appeared to mull things over, but he soon passed the report on to the captain of the Fertio soldiers in the hopes of confirming Van's talents. Amused, the soldier had Van fight one of the boys in soldier training.

The captain had his own doubts about Van, but the boy needed just a few moments to prove himself capable of fighting on even footing with the older boys. When he witnessed it, the captain's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Van was barely four, yet he was defeating an experienced soldier-in-training who was ten years old.

As the days went on, Van won more and more of their bouts. The boy wasn't just riding momentum; he was observing his opponent and carefully thinking about how to fight. He was at a clear disadvantage when it came to strength, stamina, and size, so it all came down to his natural skills. The very day the captain realized that, he broke the news to Deputy Commander Dee.

And that was how Van's nightmarish educational plan became even worse.

Meanwhile, Till nursed a deeply exhausted Van day in and day out without realizing she was the one who'd brought Esparda and Dee into the fold.

Side Story:

Khamsin's Treasure

SINCE BIRTH, KHAM SIN HAD NO MEMORIES OF HIS father's love. His mother wasn't around, and whenever he asked his father about her, his answer came as a fist to the face. He never found out what had happened to her.

These should have been sad, painful memories, but because Khamsin didn't know what a functional family looked like, he didn't truly understand how unfortunate his situation was. Somewhere in his heart, he believed his father loved him.

But one day, their poverty hit a breaking point, and Khamsin's father opted to sell him into slavery. That was when his heart finally shattered to pieces. No matter how much he sobbed or apologized, his father did not change his mind.

Thus, Khamsin was enslaved.

Yet, as fate would have it, the person who purchased him was a high-class noble child who just happened to pass by. The boy's name was Van Nei Fertio, and he was two years younger than Khamsin—but the world he lived in was entirely different.

Khamsin, who had been wondering about his future, was surprised to find that his life changed for the better. Instead of being unfairly beaten, he received a place to live and brand-new clothes. Instead of struggling to find food, he was allowed to eat all kinds of delicious things and drink fresh, clear water.

Perhaps most importantly, everyone was so kind to little Khamsin. His maid instructor and butler-in-training could be strict, but they treated him seriously, mussed up his hair, and complimented him when he accomplished feats he'd never managed before. The young Khamsin was incapable of putting his gratitude into words, but the warm tears never stopped flowing.

Having settled in and come out of his shell a little, Khamsin developed a powerful fascination with the boy named Van. He was Khamsin's master. Needless to say, he desired to learn more about him, but that wasn't all.

Before Van acquired him, Khamsin had feared the nobility. This fear didn't stem from anything he'd heard, but rather an impression he got from watching the people around him. As he attended to Van, however, his prejudice dissipated completely.

"Khamsin, could you grab that book for me?"

"O-of course!"

"Thanks." Van flashed him a carefree smile.

This noble had openly offered his gratitude to a slave. Khamsin bowed his head as a strange sensation overtook him. He was happy, not to mention proud when Van complimented him. He was also a little embarrassed. He craved even more praise.

Khamsin continued to serve Van as his heart thrummed with these complex emotions.

Eventually, he caught the maids and butlers gossiping about Van. According to them, the boy was a child prodigy. By asking a single question or learning one piece of information, he could go on to comprehend so much more. Additionally, he was able to lock blades with soldiers-in-training several years older. He wasn't the oldest child in his family line, yet there was a strong possibility he would become heir to the marquisate. Hearing things like that made Khamsin feel as thrilled as though they were talking about him. They spoke of the master who'd purchased him as a future hero.

Mustering every bit of his courage, Khamsin asked Van, "Is there anything I can do for you, my lord?"

With a smile and a nod, Van replied, "Yes, actually. Get strong so you can protect me. Become the strongest knight of them all."

Khamsin felt as though a fire had been lit in his chest. Van might not have answered the question seriously, but for Khamsin, he now had a new goal in life to aspire to.

"Leave it to me! I'll become even stronger than Sir Dee!"

He put words to his excitement and sense of duty, swearing right then and

there to live up to Van's expectations. Khamsin had already been receiving special training from Dee to serve as Van's stand-in, and it was exhausting work. But that day, his mentality changed in a big way. He participated in his training more proactively than ever before, and whenever he had free time, he practiced with a stick.

It wasn't long before Dee noticed this change. He trained the boy even harder in the hopes that he could excel—and excel he did.

When Van's magical aptitude came to light and he was kicked out of his house, Khamsin's feelings never wavered. He would be the most powerful knight of all, serving his heroic master. His objective—his hope for the future—remained intact.

So when Van gifted him his first sword, Khamsin trembled with more joy than he'd ever felt in his life.

When he was alone, he couldn't help but cradle the sword, grinning from ear to ear.

“Heh... Heh heh heh...”

Khamsin stood outside Van's carriage, gripping the wooden sword and giggling to himself. Dee's underlings, Arb and Lowe, watched on with unsettled expressions.

Van's training time had been reduced, so he'd plateaued, although he was still about as good as your average knight. Khamsin, on the other hand, could fight on equal footing with Arb and Lowe. Though Khamsin hadn't noticed this himself, he was one step ahead of Van when it came to swordplay and swordplay alone. The pair of knights feared that they would be surpassed by a child, so they secretly started their own training regimen. Everyone involved was amicable on the surface, but they all felt a strong rivalry.

“What is this?! All you did was run and swing your swords a little, and you can't move?!”

“Come on, Deputy Commander. A *little*? Really?!”

“We ran all morning...in full armor...”

Arb and Lowe were both out of breath, trying to talk back to a very angry Dee. Khamsin wiped his sweaty, dirt-covered face with his sleeve and stood up, sword in hand.

“I-I can still move! Sir Dee, let’s continue!”

“Oooh, wonderful, Khamsin! Let’s move on to sparring! Is there anyone who can face him?!” Dee asked happily as he looked around.

Arb and Lowe were still on the ground. They glanced at each other and stood up, still panting.

“I-I’ll do it...”

“No, I will...”

Dee’s brows shot up, and then he beamed with a nod. “I see you’re motivated for once! Then let us hold a round robin tournament! First up is Khamsin and Lowe!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood!”

The pair responded with vigor and wobbled their way toward each other. Despite running nonstop and swinging their swords around, the pair fought a nail-biting match that left the knights around them holding their collective breath.

Watching from afar, Van laughed dryly. “Ha ha ha ha... Must be rough to spend the whole day training. I could never handle that kind of hellish work. Plus, Khamsin’s a whole head shorter than everyone else. It’s crazy what he can do...” He grimaced.

Unfortunately for Van, Esparda came over to tutor him when he noticed that the boy had free time on his hands. For him, that was a different kind of hell entirely.

Though Khamsin was constantly training, he did have time to himself.

After receiving the wooden sword, he had subsequently been given iron and mithril ones, and he treasured them all. He coveted them so much that he refused to use them outside of combat.

Khamsin laid out his swords in his bedroom, sat down, and carefully maintained each one. This was when he was at his most relaxed.

“Heh heh heh heh...”

As he did every single night, Khamsin laughed to himself all alone in his room.

Afterword

HI, THIS IS SOU AKAIKE HERE. THANK YOU SO MUCH for checking out my book!

I've always loved simulation games. I've built all kinds of things: towns, islands, convenience stores, hamburger joints... I've even managed theme parks and alternate worlds. I wanted to try adapting that sim experience over to a novel.

Specifically, I had castle or village tower defense in mind. The protagonist would be the lord, and they would protect their village. I wanted to write about the development of the village and the tower defense elements. I avoided making the protagonist completely penniless or setting it somewhere so remote that there was nothing nearby. I wanted to get to the tower defense aspects as quickly as possible, you see.

But when I started writing, I was surprised to find that I really enjoyed the protagonist's time as a child, and I ended up writing way more than I anticipated. That said, I still don't feel like I've really brought out his best qualities. Writing is tremendously fun, but it's something to think about. I want to write a story that gets more interesting the longer it goes.

There's an infinite number of things I'd like to write, but I suppose I should end with expressing my gratitude.

First, I want to thank everyone involved with the publishing of this book. I wish to thank Kururi for the wonderful illustrations. You made all of my characters look truly adorable. Additionally, I want to thank my lead editor, Lord H, for reading my manuscript over and over again and being in the trenches with me. I am so grateful—you've been an incredible help. I'd also like to thank the fine folks of Overlap, the proofreaders, the book stores, and everyone else involved with making this book happen. Thank you so much.

And finally, I would like to express the most gratitude humanly possible to you, the reader. Thank you so very much!

A manga adaptation covering the same material is also starting up! Please

check that out as well!

—***SOU AKAIKE***



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